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LEOPARD LUKE, The King of Horse-Thieves; Or, THE SWAMP SQUATTER'S DOOM.

BY CAPTAIN MARK WILTON,

AUTHOR OF "CACTUS JACK," "DON SOMBRERO," "LADY JAGUAR," "THE SCORPION BROTHERS," "CANYON DAVE," ETC., ETC.



LEOPARD LUKE TURNED IN HIS SADDLE AND WAVED A DEFIANT FAREWELL.

Leopard Luke,

The King of Horse-Thieves;

OR,

The Swamp Squatter's Doom.

BY CAPT. MARK WILTON,

AUTHOR OF "IRON-ARMED ABE," "BULLET HEAD," "BARRANCA BILL," "LONG-HAIRED MAX," "THE SCORPION BROTHERS," "DON SOMBRERO," "CANYON DAVE," "BUCKSHOT BEN," ETC.

CHAPTER I.

THE SQUATTER'S VOW.

BURT HADSHAW entered the house and put his rifle away in its usual resting-place. The weapon had failed to furnish any game that day, and there was a scowl on the face of the squatter. He was one of those rough, hardy fellows common to Missouri, but his face was not bad.

"Whar is Relva?" he asked, addressing his wife.

"In her room," answered Mrs. Hadshaw. "The child don't seem in her usual spirits, somehow. I'm afraid something has gone wrong with her."

"Mebbe that Leopard Luke has been around ag'in, molestin' her with his idle talk. Ef he has—"

"Stop, Burton! It ain't Leopard Luke, this time," was the grave reply.

Burt Hadshaw wheeled toward his wife again, a deeper frown crossing his face.

"This time!" he echoed. "You speak ez though Relva hez lovers a-shootin' up at every path she takes. What d'ye mean? I've sent Luke, ther hoss-thief, a-flyin', an' ef thar is more they kin foller ther same road."

"I've got something to tell you, Burton."

"Then, why don't ye tell it? You women are slower nor snails. Out with it!"

From her pocket Mrs. Hadshaw took a letter and extended toward him, but he brushed it aside impatiently.

"What mummery is this? You know I can't read. Do it yourself, or tell what 'tis."

"I'll read it, word for word."

There was a tremor in the woman's voice and her lips quivered. Plainly, she was deeply moved, but Burt Hadshaw was not a man to heed such signs of feminine emotion. In a faltering voice she read as follows:

"RELVA:—I am about to return home, but there is little pleasure in the thought. I cannot go to you; we cannot be to each other what we were in the past. May Heaven forgive me if I wound you, but time has shown me that it would be madness for me to make you my wife. I realize all your goodness and honor, but think of the difference in our worldly stations! For us to marry would be to subject both to misery; you would not feel at home in the new position, and I— Well, you know how proud my family are, and I dare not do it. I sincerely regret that you ever loved me, but I hope time has shown you it was but a passing fancy. Let us forget it and begin life anew, forgiving each other for the past, if there is anything to forgive."

"More than this, I am to be married immediately after my return. I have selected a lady my equal in all things; I wish you could bring yourself to bless us. I shall always be your friend, your well-wisher, and what I can do for you shall be freely done. I depend on your honor to destroy this letter."

"ELBERT BENNINGTON."

From the beginning Burt Hadshaw had been interested. Rough as he was, he loved Relva, his only child, and her happiness outweighed all other matters. So he listened closely, and there was no reason why his interest should flag.

As his wife went on his dark face grew darker, and more ominous until it was like a thunder-cloud. His strong form, too, trembled like a wind-shaken leaf. He had surmised the name before the signature was read, yet at its sound he burst into a hoarse cry.

What he said no one ever knew. It was like the cry of a grizzly in distress. He grasped the arm of his wife in a tenacious hold.

"Whar did you get that?" he asked in a thrilling whisper. "Whar did you get it?"

"I found it on the floor; Relva must have dropped it."

The squatter stood for several seconds motionless, but that his mind was busy was soon shown.

"And he has trifled with her—that smooth-tongued villain! Why didn't I suspect it? Why couldn't I see that all his comin' here was with an object? Idiot that I was, I felt a pleasure in having him for a companion on my hunts, and felt proud when he talked ter Relva. Ther snake, ther dastard! Ther letter—read it ag'in!"

Mrs. Hadshaw read, and then there was another outburst.

"He wishes she c'u'd bring herself ter bless them!" he cried, with terrible sarcasm. He wants blessin's from ther woman whose heart he hez broke. He shall have a blessin', but it'll be a kind he don't like."

Burt looked toward his rifle, hesitated and then took several turns across the room, moving with long strides. His wife watched him with manifest uneasiness, alarmed at the storm she had raised. Now that it was too late, she regretted that her own indignation had been given such a vent.

Anon, Hadshaw paused. His face was calm, and but for a deeper tone to his voice he showed no emotion.

"Bring ther child hyar," he directed.

The woman went on her mission and the squatter took down his rifle and replaced the old cap with a new one. There was something ominous about his movements, for though he was an honest man, he had an ungovernable temper when aroused.

He was rude, unlearned and poor. A squatter on the little piece of land he occupied, he really was worth little more than the value of the rifle before mentioned. His cabin was very poorly furnished, fine clothing was unknown to the family, and yet there had always been enough of honestly-obtained food in the house.

A mile to the north was the Bennington mansion. The family was the richest for many miles around. The plantation embraced several hundred acres and was extremely fertile. An ample force of slaves worked the estate. And the Benningtons were like lords of the land.

Burt Hadshaw knew them all. When Jay Bennington died he left a widow and two sons, Elbert and Hugh, to bear his name. Hugh, having graduated at West Point, entered the army and had only recently returned. Poor health had compelled him to resign his captain's position and return to his home, but at the time of our story he had entirely recovered.

Elbert, the eldest son, had been liked by all. Frank, jovial, witty, graceful and accomplished, he had been as well liked by his slaves as by his equals. Hadshaw had hunted with him through the swamps, and liked him well; but on this evening he was brought to see that he had been a snake in the humble home where dwelt Relva.

The girl accompanied her mother on her return. There was nothing of the "poor white" in her appearance. Slight, delicate, refined and intellectual, it was no wonder rough Burt loved her. Though his daughter, she had the grace of the aristocracy; had she been born a Bennington, she would most worthily have filled her station.

She was slight of form, with golden hair, blue eyes and a pink complexion very pretty in its way. Her nature had been bright and buoyant, but on the present occasion there were undeniable traces of sorrow on her face and she avoided her father's gaze.

"Ye have been cryin', child," he said, gently.

"It is only a headache," she answered, trying to speak bravely.

"I think it is more. It seems ter me like ther heart-ache," Burt bluntly said.

She looked at him in a frightened way, and then he produced the letter from behind his back.

"Ye see this scrap o' paper," he went on, steadily. "Mebbe you recognize it. 'Tis from Elbert Bennington and addressed ter you."

She sprung forward, the color retreating from her face.

"Let me have it!" she feverishly exclaimed.

He put her gently aside.

"Not yet, child, not yet. First, tell me all about this yer affair. I wanter know what Bennington has did."

"Nothing, nothing. That letter was only—"

"Don't stop ter look fur an excuse. Tell me ther truth. Tell me what ther letter hez outlined. Elbert Bennington hez amused hisself by makin' love ter you. Your poety face captivated him, an' he hadn't ther strength ter say 'No' ter himself. He wooed ye, little 'un, an' most likely promised ye should be mistress o' Bennington Hall. Hev I spoke straight?"

His assumed moderation lulled the girl's rising fears and she burst into tears. Her heart was heavy; that very evening the man whom she loved with all the strength of her gentle nature was to marry another woman. She had tried to hide her sorrow, and it would have been done, perhaps, had she not unluckily lost the letter; but with the truth made plain she obeyed the impulse of her heart and told all.

It was not a story new in its entirety or in its details. Elbert Bennington had wooed a girl so far beneath him in the social scale that he never dreamed of marrying her. He had amused himself; he had never done more. There had been nothing to warn Relva that her confidence was misplaced. Reading her as he did, Bennington had guarded every word and act and she had not dreamed that he was less than an honorable man.

It was as Burt Hadshaw had expected. He heard the whole story without an angry word, and as Relva's head was bowed she could not see that his brows were contracted in an ominous way and his face dark with suppressed passion.

So perfect was his self-control that when all was told he made no outburst. There was a long silence, during which he looked steadily at Relva. She was paler and thinner than she had been, and he understood the meaning of the

mysterious illness of the past weeks. It was one of mind, not of body.

How Burt loved her cannot be easily told. It was an affection much like that the grizzly feels for its young. He was not educated, nor refined, but every throb of his heart pulsed love for Relva. She was his light in darkness; his one treasure.

Now, she bowed before him with a broken heart, and the grizzly in his nature came to the front.

He walked to the other side of the room and took down his rifle in silence, but the action, coupled with his looks, caused Mrs. Hadshaw to utter a cry which brought up Relva's head.

She saw enough to alarm her, in turn, and she sprung forward and caught the squatter's arm.

"Father! father!" she cried, "what would you do?"

"I'm a-goin' ter Albert Bennington," hoarsely replied Hadshaw; "I'm a-goin' ter him at his weddin'-ceremony; an' I'm a-goin' fer vengeance!"

His passion was terrible; he shook like a leaf and his eyes were like blazing coals.

"Father! Oh! have mercy, father!"

"Marcy! And fur him? Marcy fur ther man who hez ruined my home? I'll give him the marcy o' ther panther; I'll wring his neck ez though he war a kitten!"

"Burton, remember the Divine command, 'Thou shalt not kill!'" cried Mrs. Hadshaw, hysterically.

"It war not fur him!" cried the squatter, lifting one hand on high. "Ther Master o' Life never intended it fur sech a snake ez he. What! would you hev me share ther serpent whose trail ez on my hearth? No, woman, no! I'll crush his head under my heel!"

He tried to move toward the door, but wife and daughter held him back. Their hearts were like lead in their bosoms. The shadow of blood was over the Hadshaw cabin; the shadow of death over the Bennington mansion.

"Let me go!" cried Burt, hoarsely. "I will go! Over yon they're a-preparin' fur ther weddin'. Ther bride is thar in her finery an' Elbert Bennington was never chopperer. Ther guests are thar, but thar'll be one uninvited one; I'll be thar; I an' my rifle. Let me go!"

"You shall not harm him!" cried Relva.

"I'll kill him!" hissed Burt Hadshaw; and with these words he cast both women aside, jerked open the door and fled into the darkness.

One moment his footsteps were marked by the crashing of dry limbs as he trod upon them, and the sounds were in the direction of the Bennington mansion; and then he could no longer be heard by those at the cabin.

But he did not pause. He went on with long strides, his muscular fingers gripping his rifle as though he would crush the barrel, and his face working convulsively. Muttered words, too, fell from his lips and he seemed like a madman.

Strange and startling guest to be going to the marriage ceremony at Bennington Hall!

And in the cabin Relva Hadshaw lay prostrate and insensible on the floor, while her mother moaned, wept and prayed above her; wept for her daughter and prayed for the husband who, she feared, would that night do that which would bring disgrace, desolation and death to the Hadshaw family.

But nothing could stop the squatter.

CHAPTER II.

THE SWAMP ISLAND.

A FEW hours previous to the scene just described, and when the sun was yet the ruling monarch, the birds and reptiles of Copperhead Swamp were at certain points aroused from their indifference by the passage of a boat over the sluggish water.

Copperhead Swamp was a place of evil repute. It was dark, tangled, gloomy and, really, but little known. Even the negroes did not care to hunt there to any great extent. Some who had tried it never came back. Whether they died in the treacherous mud, at the jaws of an alligator, or otherwise, was never known; enough that they did not return.

And the more ignorant of the people around the swamp would tell of other dangers than alligators and mud. They would tell of ghosts—the unquiet shadows of those who had died there; and of fierce, half-starved runaway slaves who hesitated to attack no one—the unquiet shadows of those who lived there.

Hence, the evil reputation of Copperhead Swamp.

Yet, he who traveled there on the occasion under notice did not seem to care for any of these terrors. He occupied an old, dingy boat, but he plied the oars as buoyantly as though he had a masterpiece of modern workmanship.

His appearance was in keeping with his indifference. Handsome he certainly was, with a fine form and regular features, while brown, wavy hair, large blue eyes and an expression at once careless, intelligent and wide-awake would have made many a man, as well as many a romantic girl, look at him long and earnestly.

He kept on over the sluggish water, showing a

profound indifference to the objects by the way, until he floated into a place as gloomy as nature could well be. Beneath him was dark water which did not seem to move and on the surface of which was a greenish coating of accumulated matter; on each side dwarfed and ungainly bushes made a hedge to the water's edge; and, above, the larger trees met and shut out nearly all light.

It was a place fit for the occupancy of ghosts, if Copperhead Swamp possessed any, but the man rowed cheerfully on, heedless of everything.

He went a hundred yards further and then turned abruptly to the left, pulling through the hedge at a point where there seemed to be no opening. Somewhat further he went, and through what was almost a labyrinth. Gigantic trees and reed-covered hummocks were in his path, and it was only by constant twisting and turning that he moved at all.

Then he suddenly emerged from the place and floated on tranquil water. He paused, however, peered ahead in the darkness and then uttered a peculiar whistle.

Twice he repeated it, getting no reply but the distant splashing of the alligators and the notes of the night-birds, and then came an undeniable answer.

The voyager drove his boat ashore. A human form stood before him, looking gigantic and ominous, but the young man sprang lightly to the land and put out his hand.

"How are you, Butcher?" he cried, airily.

"Bress de Lord, am it you, Massa Luke?" came the answer.

"I'm thinking it is, old boy. Leopard Luke is back at his old stamping-ground."

"But dey'll get you, sah—"

"What! haven't you heard that I was pardoned?"

"Ay, ay; but dis am no safe place fur you. Men knows you hyar, an' dey'll not scruple ter shoot you, sah."

Leopard Luke laughed lightly.

"Nonsense! Don't you go to borrowing trouble, Butcher. If there's a man in Missouri wants to harness me, let him come on. But they don't; they know Leopard Luke, and they let him have ample rope. But, come, old man; why do we stand here like clods? Fasten my boat; it's so villainously dark I can't find a place; and then we'll go to the cabin— It still stands, don't it?"

"Ay, ay, Massa Luke; de same ole cabin."

"Then, hurry up."

Butcher secured the boat as directed, and then they walked away together. There was no need of caution there; they had passed the dangerous point and were on a knoll, or "island," where the footing was of the best kind, and the noble pines sprinkled a carpet of velvety needles for their feet.

They entered a cabin made of poles, chinked with mud. A fire burned within, and after a vigorous attack from the visitor it flared up brightly.

"Stand around, Butcher, old boy," cried Luke, in his usual light-hearted way; "I want to look at you. Here you are, just the same as ever; I'd almost swear not a day older."

The light fell squarely upon Butcher and showed him to be a man of at least sixty-five years. He was a full-blooded negro, and his features were coarse and almost repulsive, but the snow-white hair with which they were framed counteracted the appearance a little.

In size he was almost a giant, being over six feet in height and powerfully made. His coarse, ill-fitting garments served to increase the impression of his size and it would have been a bold man who would have dared to tempt his wrath, even with his sixty-five years.

"Just the same as ever, Butcher; just the same," his visitor again declared.

The negro looked at him uneasily.

"I's drefful glad ter see you," he said, "but I ain't anyways sure it am safe fur you to be hyar. It'm true you's got a pardon, but dar's them who still remembers de ole times an' dey might ride rusty, you know, chile."

Luke laughed again, seeming to see something very comical in the situation, but his mood suddenly changed.

"Why in the dickens did old Jay Bennington get that pardon for me?" he suddenly demanded. "I had stolen horses from him; why didn't he set the lynchers on me and not get me pardoned so that I could steal again?"

"Don't say 'steal,' chile—"

"Of course we'll say steal; there's no other word to fit the case. I'm Leopard Luke, the horse-thief. Don't put any fine points on it. Well, what of old Bennington—why did he go to the Governor and get me pardoned?"

"Ole massa wa'n't so werry bad a man—"

Luke interrupted with a laugh.

"You say that when your back is a checker-board from the beating he caused to be given you, when his devilish cruelty drove you to the hermit-life you have lived for a period, to me, unknown. Don't say it again; deal frankly with me. Old Bennington took a fancy to me, somehow; why, I can't guess. He suffered somewhat from my deeds when I was on the

road, but on at least two occasions he helped me."

"You oughter be grateful, Massa Luke."

"Grateful thunder! Not I. Don't I remember how I once went to him and asked that he furnish me with the means of being a man? That was when I was a boy, but as he drove me out of his house I remember it all. Well, well; the old man is in his grave, so I shall never need to thank him for that pardon. Butcher, why do you suppose I've come back?"

The young man asked the question standing with his back to the fire and speaking as gayly as though he was about to announce his approaching marriage, but Butcher's troubled look did not vanish.

"I don't know, Massa Luke."

"I'm going at it, again."

"At it?"

"Into the horse business."

"Not—not taking dem, sah?"

"Stealing them, I mean," was the cool answer. "I've got to make a raise, and so I've got together another band. Very soon the papers will be full of the daring deeds of Leopard Luke, the same as of old, and how my blood will rush as I speed across the country. I've even got another spotted horse, for myself, in order to retain my old title. Aha! Leopard Luke is on deck!"

He spoke exultantly and his face lighted with enthusiasm, but the old negro was the picture of pain and consternation. He realized, if his companion did not, how ignoble was the calling of a horse-thief, and where it was likely to land its follower.

"No, no, Massa Luke, don't say dat!" he exclaimed, putting out both hands imploringly. "Ef dey catch you ag'in it is—"

"It's the rope. I know that well enough; somehow, people are down on such a harmless amusement as horse-stealing. Well, I admit there is danger, but I can't keep out of it. There is a fascination about it I can't resist, and here I am ready to begin work again."

The reckless young man broke into a gay song, but Butcher was far from being in the same mood. He implored Luke by every argument he could use to abandon his design; a vain attempt, for the man was as immovable, when his mind had been made up, as a rock.

He was thoroughly bad at heart; wild, reckless, cruel, too indolent for honest work and well adapted for dishonesty; but when his handsome face and buoyant manner were first brought to bear on a stranger, the impression was favorable.

Butcher loved this wayward man with an unwavering strength. He had known him since he was a child in his cradle, and twenty-eight years had not lessened his devotion. Hence his alarm when Leopard Luke announced that he was about to resume his old life of a horse-thief.

"Say no more, Butcher; say no more," finally directed the younger man, with a wave of his hand. "The matter is settled, and can't be undone. But one thing more. Tell me of Relva Hadshaw."

"She's still dar; no change."

"I'm going to marry her some day," said Luke, with a yawn. "At present I don't stand well there. But is over-scrupulous and don't believe in my trade, and Relva is inclined to be a coquette. She loves me, though—I feel sure she does—and when I've made ten thousand on the road I'll marry her."

"She's a fine gal, Massa Luke."

"Of course. Glad you agree with me on one point. I'm going over to see her, one of these days. I shall make my home with you until I get my band in motion. A short period of peace and quiet, and then, lo! Leopard Luke bursts upon the world again like a meteor!"

CHAPTER III.

WHAT THE EVENING BROUGHT FORTH.

The Bennington mansion was ablaze with lights, and every heart was buoyant and happy. That evening Elbert, the eldest of the brothers, was to marry a rich and beautiful girl, and one would have said all the world rejoiced.

"Every one likes you—every one is wishing you happiness and long life," said Hugh, the younger brother, as he took his kinsman's hand.

Something like a shadow crossed the face of Elbert. He remembered a lowly cabin in the wood; he remembered Relva Hadshaw, and knew her heart was breaking; but he was supremely selfish, and—she was far below him in the social scale.

"I'm a lucky fellow," he said. "It isn't every one who can win a wife like Augusta."

It was Hugh's turn to look grave, but the expression was lost in a sudden compression of his lips.

"You are right," he said, in a voice a little strained and unnatural. "Augusta is beautiful, accomplished, noble. I—congratulate—you."

The last words were spoken with perceptible effort, and Hugh turned his head aside.

Elbert made a suitable reply, and then there was a brief silence between the brothers.

Very different were they in every way. Elbert was a blonde, with a shade of hair almost like gold, and yet becoming; a small, light-colored mustache, blue eyes, an almost effeminate, yet very graceful figure, and a way which people called frank, noble and winning. He was certainly light-hearted—too much so for his own good, and had a faculty of adapting himself to all classes and ages.

Better by far would it have been for both Relva Hadshaw and himself had he lacked that faculty!

Hugh was his opposite. Dark-complexioned, even to swarthy, he had straight, black hair and dark eyes, a heavy black mustache, and a solid, muscular form. He was a man of few words. People even called him cold, brusque and indifferent to good breeding. Proud he was not, so far as any knew, but with decided opinions, he would as quick "snub" a millionaire as a coon-hunter, if he disliked him.

Men called him by his military title since he had left the army, and it fitted him well.

Before their conversation was resumed, some one came to Elbert with a message. He went away, and Hugh walked on to another room, with his hands behind his back, and his square jaws firmly set.

His was not a face to wear at a bridal, but no one expected to see Captain Bennington look agreeable.

A little later he saw Augusta Warburton surrounded by her bridesmaids. She was a tall, slender, beautiful girl; a fit representative of her proud old family; and as Hugh looked his face grew darker and he withdrew to the shelter of a curtained window.

"It makes me feel like a Cain!" he muttered, looking out into the night. "My brother gets all the good things of life. Two-thirds our father's fortune is his; he has ten friends to my one—nay, five hundred—and, he has Augusta Warburton!"

The speaker's fingers worked nervously together and his dark face kept them company. Had the giddy bridesmaids seen him then they would have fled in terror.

"To-night," went on the younger brother, "I lose forever the only woman for whom I ever cared. She becomes my brother's wife; he robs me of her as he has robbed me of all else. Yet, she smiles on me, and perhaps if it were not for him—"

He ceased to mutter, but it was several minutes before he turned away from the window. Straight into the night he looked, as though there was something of interest there, but what he saw must have been in the form of something of his own painting.

When he turned away it was to go to his own chamber. There he remained for a few minutes, after which he came down and joined the guests. Some of them noticed then that his dark face was slightly pale, and the iron look of his jaws had never been more prominent, but he did not confide in any one.

Elbert had never been in better spirits, but he found that he was overworking himself in his devotion to his friends, and resolved to seek the fresh air for a while. He went out alone, and without a word to any one, but he had gone but a few paces when he heard the side-door, through which he had emerged, again open.

He looked around and saw his brother, but a fancy to be alone caused him to walk away toward the further side of the grounds. He drew out a cigar and lit it, smiling lightly.

"My last bachelor smoke! It's a momentous point in any man's career, but I dare say I shall never smoke less than now. I seek an increase, not a loss, of pleasure."

Half the cigar had been consumed when a step sounded on the graveled walk and he saw some one of a muscular form approaching.

"It that you, Hugh?" he asked.

"No, it ain't Hugh," answered the man promptly. "It ain't your brother, and it ain't none o' them palaverin' fools in thar. It are a man on business!"

The harshness of the voice, and the way in which the breech of the man's rifle came down on the ground made Bennington straighten quickly. He knew the social rank of the speaker by his voice, even while he failed to recognize him.

"What do you mean, fellow?" he haughtily demanded.

"So I'm a feller, am I! You didn't talk that-a-way when we whered around Copperhead Swamp together. But that time's gone an' you're a-gwine ter disown 'em as you palavered onc't when you had an ax ter grind."

The huskiness of the voice had up to this time proved a good disguise, but Elbert Bennington now sprung to his feet.

"Burt Hadshaw!" he exclaimed.

"Burt Hadshaw it are," returned the squatter, promptly. "You don't seem over-glad ter see me."

"Why, I didn't expect—that is—"

"You didn't expect ther fayther o' my gal ter come whar ye was about ter wed a high-born female. That's quite likely; but, ex ye see, I'm hyar."

Burt's deep tones made Elbert shiver in spite

of himself, but he tried to retain his old manner.

"Yes, and I'm glad to see you, Burt. You and I have tramped the woods many a day, and now I see you have not forgotten me on my bridal eve."

"Furgot ye? Rest sart'in I haven't. Nol An' I've come all ther way from ther ole cabin fur ter see ye. Did ye s'pose Relva would see ye wed an' send no word?"

Elbert felt a strange chill. The squatter's manner was strange and unnatural. Why did he mention Relva? Had the girl broken her promise and told of his broken vows?

"Relva is very kind," he muttered.

"Kind!" repeated Hadshaw. "Yas, she's too kind, my gal is; too kind an' furgivin'; but, Elbert Benninton, I ain't taken that way. I never forgive. Do ye s'pose I kin forgive what ye've done ter my home? My gal is a fadin' like a plucked flower, an' she owes it ter you. I know ther truth at last. I know how ye came ter my cabin an' won her heart like ther slimy, crawlin' snake ye be, an' made her b'lieve ye was all pure gold. Oh! that was manly, warn't it—an innercent, un'arned gal like her an' a traveled man like you. It was manly, an' honorable, an' worthy 'o a Benninton, warn't it?"

This long address was poured forth with terrible and bitter sarcasm, and for a while Elbert bowed before it in shame. Selfish and dishonorable as he was, the Hadshaw episode had troubled him not a little, and he had offered Relva money to go away where he would never see her.

So, when Burt began to speak, he felt undeniable shame, but toward the end his hot blood arose.

"Well, what are you going to do about it?" he demanded.

"Ther question is, what be *you* gwine ter do?"

"Nothing," said Elbert, stoutly.

"Nawthin'?"

"Nothing, sir. What do you expect? Am I to marry your daughter because she has seen fit to fall in love with a man far above her in the social scale, and whom she has met but casually—"

"Stop!" commanded Hadshaw. "Don't ye deal one iota in lies; not an iota. I know ther hull case; how ye sought her love, never intendin' ter do more, an' how ye cast her off. Elbert Benninton, my blood is up. I love my gal, fur she's all I've got, an' no human critter kin do her a wrong. Ye hear me?"

"I've done her no wrong," cried Elbert. "Are a few gallant speeches to be called a sin?"

"You are ter be called ther prince o' sinners," answered Burt. "My gal—"

"Always harping on your daughter!" sneered the rich man. "Hang the girl, send her to a convent!"

The words had scarcely passed his lips when Burt Hadshaw's grasp encircled his arm with crushing force.

"Don't ye say it ag'in!" hissed the squatter. "Don't ye do it, or I'll kill ye like ther slimy snake ye be. Don't ye do it!"

"Let me go!" cried Elbert, vainly endeavoring to break his hold.

"Mebbe you're wanted inside, whar your blue-blood bride is awaitin'. Let her wait; you'll be a fit subject fur a weddin' when I git through with ye."

"Let me go, or I'll strike you!"

Burt Hadshaw laughed hoarsely.

"You'd do big things a-strikin' me, you would; but I'd like ter hev you do it. I've got an account to squar' with you, an' it'll lay lighter on my conscience ef you kick an' fight a leetle yerself. Oh! you infernal, slimy snake! I'll make you a fine bridegroom!"

"Stand off, you villain, or I'll call for help," said Elbert, beginning to be not a little alarmed.

"Call an' be durned ter ye! That won't save ye. I tell ye I've come fur vengeance, an' I'm gwine ter hev it. I reckon this hyar weddin' 'll be postponed!"

There was a chilling significance in the last words which destroyed what little calmness Elbert had left. He struck the squatter in the face. Another moment and they were engaged in a desperate struggle.

CHAPTER IV.

FOUND DEAD.

THE hour at which the marriage ceremony was to take place approached, and people looked for Elbert Benninton, but he was not in the mansion. Those who searched for him found Hugh standing by a window and gazing out into the night in the old way. They spoke to him and he turned with a start. His face seemed pale, but it may have been the reflection from the flaring lights.

He had not seen Elbert, he said, in a steady voice; and when they asked if he had been outside, he answered in the negative. Yet he had also been away from the company for some time.

Some of the young men continued the search, jesting because Elbert had to be hunted for on

such an occasion, but Hugh again turned his gaze on the black night. Once Augusta Warburton, in passing, lingered for a moment near the window as though to address him, but though he knew she was there, he did not turn.

She felt a little piqued, but knowing his way, finally went on without a word. He looked after her with a strange expression.

"She don't know!" he muttered, and then turned his face again to the window.

Ten minutes passed. Then there was a stir near the side-door. One of the searchers entered, and all eyes were fixed upon him. He, however, stood like a statue, and his expression sent a thrill of uneasiness to the observers. His face was very pale, his eyes seemed strained and—was it horror that was pictured on his face?

"What is wrong?" some one asked.

The question aroused him, and his pale lips moved. Once he vainly tried to speak; then his husky voice arose.

"Come with me, some of you," he muttered.

A fresh uneasiness fell over the assembled guests. The bride-elect and Elbert Bennington's mother were not in the room, and Hugh stood motionless at a distant window. He had been unseen by the messenger.

Several of the men went out, leaving the ladies hushed and silent. It was only at the end of some minutes that they began to whisper among themselves, glancing as they did so at the statue-like form of Hugh Bennington.

In the mean while, the men who followed the messenger had reached a place where they could safely talk.

"What does all this mean?" they asked.

"It means that there will be no wedding to-night; it means that Elbert is dead!"

Such was the answer which almost stunned all, but further words were stopped as they arrived where two of their number were standing over a dark object on the ground, silent and motionless as the object itself. One of them held a lantern, and its light was enough for the occasion.

The object on the ground took form.

There lay Elbert Bennington, his arms and legs thrown about in confusion, his pallid face upturned to the dark heavens, and his wide-open eyes seeming to look into theirs.

Yet each one of the beholders knew at first glance that they looked on that from which the breath of life had forever departed. Elbert Bennington lay dead on his wedding eve!

A brief silence followed, and then one of the new-comers sharply cried:

"Who has done this deed?"

"Who, indeed!" was echoed. "He hadn't an enemy in the world. Who has done it?"

It was a question no one could answer, and while the coolest of the party was sent on the ungrateful mission of breaking the news to those in the house, others examined the dead man. He had fought hard for his life; that much was clear. The ground bore evidence of the struggle. And the bruises on the silent face, and the purple flager-marks on the neck, showed that not at once had come the knife-thrust which had finally severed his hold on life.

They were still looking when there was a heavy step on the graveled walk, and as they looked up Hugh Bennington strode to the spot. The lantern was lifted, but it showed nothing new. The stern, dark face was a little paler and a little sterner than before, but the face showed little what was passing in his mind.

"Why have you not told me before?" he harshly demanded. "Why have you let valuable time go to waste while standing idly here? Some runaway slave, or other desperado, has done this deed. Who will go to my overseer and bid him turn out every person for the search?"

They understood him, and, despite the reproof he had administered, were anxious to obey. Some went on his errand, while others remained.

Hugh Bennington knelt by his brother's body. He uttered no cry, and spoke no word of regret, and his lips were calm and untrembling. It almost seemed as though his dark, stern face had been turned to stone.

Silently he laid his hand on the other's face, and gently closed the blue eyes. No one interrupted him, and no one thought it strange that Captain Bennington, a soldier bred, should meet this tragical moment with a soldier's ways.

He soon arose, however, and faced them with glittering eyes.

"He is dead," he said, in a deep voice, "but we live—for vengeance! He who did this deed shall die like the dog he is. Will the search never begin?"

Even as he spoke the men began to arrive with the overseer at their head. Then Hugh gave directions for the search. Even in that moment nothing was forgotten; he directed matters as systematically as other men could have done after mature deliberation. If the murderer had not made a prompt retreat he would fare ill before that pursuit.

Hugh did not accompany the searchers. Instead, he had his brother's body borne to the house and properly cared for. A doctor was on the scene, but he could do nothing to bring back the departed spirit.

The mansion had been turned to a place of mourning. The ladies went about in glittering dresses, which were a terrible contrast to their pallid faces. In her room Mrs. Bennington lay in a long, deathlike swoon; in another apartment, Augusta Warburton was face to face with her sorrow.

Hugh went near neither of them, but with his powerful face fixed and stern, he attended to all calmly and well. Few ventured to address him then, for though he made no expressions of sorrow, his look kept them at a distance.

One of his first acts had been to send for the local authorities, and when his search-party returned unsuccessful he promptly wrote, and sent, a dispatch to St. Louis asking that a detective be sent at once.

"No stone must be left unturned," he evenly said, to those who stood beside him.

Shortly after the overseer brought one of the negroes to his young master, now ruler of the Bennington plantation.

"He has a story ter tell which ye may, or may not, think fit ter listen to," explained the overseer.

"What is it?" Hugh tersely asked.

"I wanted ter say in dis connection," explained the negro, awkwardly, "dat it may be a 'spicious sarcumstancus. 'Bout two hours ago I was stannin' at my cabin doah when he comes up ter me an' sez:

"'Whar's Elbert Benninton?"

"Who asked you?"

"Burt Hadshaw, sah."

"Burt Hadshaw?"

"Yes, sah."

"What did he want of Elbert?"

"Doan't know, sab, fur ez I c'd give him no satisfaction he muttered su'thin' I didn't hear an' strided away."

"Which way?"

"Torige de mansion, sah."

"What became of him then?"

"Doan't know, sab, fur I didn't see him ag'in, but he seemed mighty put out about su'thin'. He kerried his rifle."

There was nothing singular in the last fact, for it would have been a strange sight, indeed, to have seen Burt Hadshaw without his rifle; but, naturally, it struck every one as peculiar and significant that the squatter, whose business with Elbert at that time could not be plausibly explained, had been hunting for him, thus armed, and in an angry mood, just before he was found dead.

"De squatter was all kivered wid mud to his knees, ez though he come frough Copperhead Swamp," added the negro, after a pause.

"It is time for Sheriff Goodrod to arrive; I think it will be well to visit Burt Hadshaw's cabin," said Hugh.

The sheriff soon arrived. He was a plain, sensible man in many ways, but, being poor himself and dependent on his office, it was easy for the rich to direct his mind.

Therefore, when he saw that public opinion was against Burt Hadshaw, he at once decided that he was the guilty man.

"But, what was his motive?" some one asked.

"Motive be hanged!" quoth Sheriff Goodrod. "That's for him to explain. Our business is to take him in."

"Wait one moment," added Hugh. "We must look to one thing we should have thought of before. Unless our thoughtless course has erased all signs, there should be tell-tale foot-prints near the spot. The condition of the ground is very favorable."

"Let me go ter whar Sambo, hyar, see'd ther squatter," said Goodrod. "I'm no fool at a trail, ef I do say it."

Extraordinary skill was not needed in this case. Even a child could have followed Burt Hadshaw from the point where he questioned the negro. Along a damp foot-path he had strode toward the house, leaving every imprint plain and distinct, until he entered the grounds surrounding the mansion.

From that point his movements were uncertain. Those who had moved restlessly about had covered his broad foot-marks with their own and the trail was lost.

A good deal of time was consumed, but at last one other sign was found. Within four feet of where Elbert had been found, and partly under a rustic seat, they discovered one of the broad, unmistakable foot-prints before described.

The last doubt vanished. Hadshaw had been at the place where Elbert died, the track had most likely been made during a personal encounter, and it seemed to be the missing link.

Hugh Bennington hesitated. What thoughts were in his mind no one could tell, for his dark face told no tales. Finally he spoke again.

"You know your duty, Goodrod."

"To arrest Hadshaw. I do; and it shell be done at once!"

CHAPTER V.

AT THE SQUATTER'S CABIN.

RELVA HADSHAW returned to consciousness, after her long swoon, with a protracted, quivering sigh. She met her mother's gaze, but not at once did she recollect what had occurred. There was a dull pain at her heart, but that had been there ever since she had received the letter from Elbert Bennington which had blasted her life.

Suddenly, however, she arose to her elbow; recollection had returned.

"Father!" she exclaimed. "Let me go to him; let me save—"

She had tried to gain her feet, but she was weak and dizzy, and as she sunk back the sentence remained unfinished.

"Be calm, my daughter," said Mrs. Hadshaw, in a voice which was like a dirge. "An hour has elapsed since Burton went away; it is now too late to prevent whatever he intended. He went by the swamp, and has had more than time to reach Bennington Hall."

"But he said he would—would—kill Elbert!" Relva spoke in a gasping whisper.

"I heard him," was the sad answer, "but we are powerless. I have prayed that he may be kept from harm and from doing harm; the rest is beyond our control."

There was truth in what she said, and Relva yielded. She buried her face in her hands, and in utter silence the two women awaited the result.

Neither walked to the door, as people usually will, but, keeping their places, one in the chair and the other on the bed, they awaited Burt Hadshaw's return.

It was a long, dreary watch. The fire burnt low, and dark shadows formed phantom-like about the room. Outside, the wind moaned dismally. It always moaned at that point, if there was any excuse for it, but never before had it sounded so dismal.

And still they waited and listened.

Finally a new sound reached their hearing; a slow, heavy footstep. Then a hand was laid on the door, it was pushed open, and Burt Hadshaw entered.

Both wife and daughter uttered a faint cry at sight of him. The look of fury had faded from his face, but it had given place to one scarcely less dreadful. The fixed, heavy scowl told of passion as plainly as ever.

More than this, the women saw an abrasion on his left cheek-bone, and his lower garments were soiled to the knee by the mud of Copperhead Swamp.

Mrs. Hadshaw sprung to her feet.

"Oh, Burton! what have you done; where have you been?"

The squatter allowed the breech of his rifle to fall to the floor with a thud.

"What d'ye s'pose I've been?" he demanded harshly. "What did I say I was goin'?"

"To Bennington Hall," she murmured faintly.

"Wall, that's whar I've been. I went ter see Elbert Bennin'ton, an' I've see'd him."

He put away his rifle, and in reaching up revealed something more to his wife's watchful eyes.

"There is blood on your hands, Burton—"

"What o' that?" he roughly answered. "Blood was shed; ther critter peeled me a bit on ther cheek; it may be mine or his'n."

"Oh! what have you done?"

"I tuk my revenge; that's what I've did. Let that be enough. Let me alone now!"

The squatter drew his chair near the fire, and throwing out his hands, brooded over the blaze, with the fixed scowl that had not left his face since he read the fatal letter.

Mother and daughter exchanged glances. Their hearts lay like lead. What had happened at Bennington Hall? They knew Burt Hadshaw's violent temper, and feared the worst, but they dared ask no further questions.

After a short time Relva buried her face in her hands as though to shut out her desolation and misery. Once Elbert Bennington had talked of making her his wife. Little did she think then that the night set apart for his wedding would find her wishing for death as the happiest lot left her.

Outside the wind wailed as usual, and the hearts of the women kept time and tune to its dirge. Hadshaw brooded over the fire, motionless, except for the occasional chafing of his blood-stained hands; never speaking, never looking at anything except the fire. Perhaps he saw pictures on the logs; pictures that were wild and as bloody as his hands.

This was the state of affairs when the door was suddenly pushed open. No rapping, no tell-tale footsteps had heralded the event, but as the door receded Sheriff Goodrod walked in, followed by three or four other men.

His appearance was enough to cause Mrs. Hadshaw to spring to her feet with a frightened cry. After what had occurred, the coming of an officer of the law was ominous.

Her cry brought Relva to her feet also, but though Burt Hadshaw looked up from the fire he kept his seat.

Sheriff Goodrod stood for a moment in silence, but he had always had a sort of respectful fear

of the women of this humble home, and he took off his hat and cleared his throat several times before speaking.

"Set down, Ben Goodrod," said the squatter, calmly. "It ain't often you come ter my shanty, but I expected ye now. Set down, man, an' don't stan' like a post."

"Ye expected me?" repeated Goodrod, seizing the expression with professional quickness.

"Ay. I've been ter Bennin'ton's, an' ther upshot on't is you're hyar. That's all right. Ter-morrer I'll be around an' settle it up, but I ain't goin' ter-night. Not I!"

The sheriff winked twice rapidly, as though his sight was befogged.

"Folks is generally tuk ez soon ez possible when murder hez been did," he finally said.

"Murder!"

The cry came from Relva and Mrs. Hadshaw simultaneously, and their pale faces became paler.

"Ay, it's murder, marm," Goodrod answered. "I hate ter say it, an' nobody is sorrier than me 'cause it's me hez ter arrest ther old man fur ther crime."

Burt Hadshaw arose so suddenly that he overturned his chair.

"What's that you say, man?" he harshly demanded. "Who's murdered?"

"Ye ought ter know. It's Elbert Bennington!"

"It's a lie!" cried the squatter, in his former voice. "Ther critter is wall thumped, but thar's no murder. Mebbe I hit him harder than I thought, but he'll come out on't. My word for't, he'll come out on't."

"Ef he does, 'twill be on t'other side," Goodrod gravely answered. "Elbert Bennington is dead as Julius Brutus."

There was another cry from Relva and she sunk on the bed in a swoon. It was a pitiful sight, and Goodrod wavered for a moment, but not so the squatter.

"Ben Goodrod, you lie!" he again said. "Is it likely I killed him with my bar' fists? I didn't strike ter kill, but ter chastise."

"Then you acknowledge 'twas you?"

"Yas, 'twas me, an' I hit fur vengeance—"

"You hit ter kill, I reckon," the sheriff answered. "When a man drives a knife plum' through a critter's heart, ther critter ain't gwine ter do much livin' arterward."

"Knifel I used no knife," Hadshaw exclaimed.

"But you stabbed him."

"No!"

"Well, he's got a hole through his heart, all ther same."

Hadshaw rubbed his hand across his face.

"Thar's a mistake, somewhar," he said. "They told you wrong, Ben. I used no knife; I used only my fists."

"I've see'd ther corpus, an' it's ez I say," was the reply.

A quick change passed over the squatter's face. "And you've come ter arrest me fur murder?"

"Yes."

"It can't be did; I won't be arrested! I'm ready fur simple assault, fur I did whale him, but murder—No! I ain't did no murder; ef a knife has been used, somebody else used it, not me. I won't surrender on no sech charge!"

The squatter caught his rifle from its resting-place and faced the men with an air which made all except Goodrod recoil a pace.

"I'm no murderer!" said Hadshaw, fiercely. "And I won't be taken fur one!"

"Sing low," mildly advised the sheriff.

"You'n me hev never had no trouble, Burt, an' we oughtn't ter begin now. Still, ther sacred majesty o' ther law must be preserved, an' you see ther odds ag'in' you. I hope thar won't be no row."

"Thar will be ther w'ust kind ef you don't keep your distance. I don't surrender on no sech charge, ter be locked up an', mebbe, hung. I ain't used no knife, an' ef Elbert Bennin'ton is dead that way you must look funder fur him ez did it. 'Twa'n't me!"

"I ain't judge, nur jury, but I'm sheriff, an' sent ter take you," said Goodrod firmly. "My work must be did."

Burt Hadshaw made no reply but stood gazing fixedly at his visitors. His heavy face was not easily read, nor did any twinkle of his eyes betray his resolution when it was formed.

Suddenly, however, he moved. With a yell which would alone have been startling, he sprung forward like a shot. One blow of his brawny fist sent Ben Goodrod tumbling over a chair, and then there was a crash and the squatter and the one window of the cabin disappeared together.

There was a sound of footsteps outside and then nothing was to be heard but the moaning of the wind.

Goodrod's subordinates had stood in blank amazement, but the sheriff gained his feet as soon as possible.

"Whar—whar—whar—"

Thus far had he stammered when the truth dawned upon him. His blood fired, he wheeled, leaped and shot through the window in the same course Hadshaw had gone. His men followed like sheep after a leader, and then no one

was in the cabin save Relva and the squatter's wife.

The former lay on the bed in her deep swoon, even as Burt Hadshaw's departure had once before left her that evening, and again her mother dropped on her knees beside her, tears flowing freely from her eyes.

Weep, unfortunate woman, weep! Your desert-like life has been full of tears, and on this night events have assumed a form which bid fair to sweep away the two oases of your life and plunge you into a deeper and lifelong misery.

CHAPTER VI.

THE MAN-HUNT.

THE dawn of the following morning gave a good illustration of what a night could bring forth. There had been a great change in the condition of two families.

At Bennington Hall all was mourning. Elbert lay dead in a room where his father and grandfather had similarly lain before him. His mother had not left her room since she heard of the tragedy, and there were grave fears she would never leave it alive. And in that hour of trial, Augusta Warburton, widowed before she was wed, put aside her own grief and became the nurse of the stricken mother.

About the house strode a tall, powerfully-built man, who had not sat down since his brother died. He personally superintended all, and forgot nothing, but when his time was his own he strode on, on, on—ever on, through the many rooms.

As he went, his forehead was contracted into a series of wrinkles, which crossed and recrossed like the lines of a spider's web. The negroes, looking at him, shivered and whispered to themselves, and yet Hugh Bennington had not shed a tear since the tragedy.

The guests of the previous night were gone. By that time they had laid aside their finery, which had proved a mockery; but they would never forget the night.

In the cabin at the edge of the swamp, two women wept, mourned, prayed. Their prayers were for Burt Hadshaw, who was—Where?

Sheriff Goodrod had returned to the Hall late in the night to report that the squatter had escaped him; but he was not at a loss how to proceed. The fugitive had taken to Copperhead Swamp, as many fugitives had done before him, and there were plenty of places to hide; but with a score of bloodhounds on the Bennington plantation, it would be no difficult matter to follow his trail.

So, at daylight, Goodrod and his men had set out, leading four hounds, and the hunt began—a hunt for human game.

The news had been telegraphed far and wide, and at the breakfast-table that morning men who were thousands of miles away read that one Burt Hadshaw, "a desperate villain," had committed a murder, and taken refuge in a place called Copperhead Swamp.

At that same moment the birds of the swamp were startled from their coverts along the trail as, preceded by a long-drawn, mournful wail, dogs and men hastened along after their human game.

Two miles ahead of them Burt Hadshaw lay sleeping. A huge log was his bed, his arm his pillow; but, wearied and mud-stained, he slept soundly, unconscious of the danger advancing along the trail.

Nearer came the note of the hound, but still the squatter slept. It seemed as though his escape had been but a temporary respite and that he was destined to fall into the hands of his enemies.

On they came, over logs and through pools, all intent on the one object, all engaged in the man-hunt.

Burt Hadshaw slept. His broad bosom arose and fell regularly, and not a motion showed that he was near arousing. The two miles had become one, and less than one; the baying sounded near; but still the fatal slumber hung about the squatter.

Suddenly, and with one motion, he bounded from the log, and with his rifle firmly grasped faced the point of danger.

"They're on my track!" he exclaimed; "they and their infernal curs. So I'm hunted by bloodhounds, curse 'em! But ther brutes ain't got me yit!"

With the last words yet on his lips he bounded away like a deer, directing his footsteps toward the darker depths of the swamp. He knew the way as well as any man, though there were places in the very interior where he had never been; where he supposed no man had ever been and returned alive; where it was said many a runaway slave had lost his life. There were to be found the treacherous bog, the alligator, copperhead and moccasins snakes—and, if report was true, the ghosts of those who had died there.

Strange, dark and forbidding was Copperhead Swamp!

Burt Hadshaw, however, cared nothing for the ghosts, and all the other things he had met and mastered before. They were as nothing compared with the pursuers in the rear, the men who sought to drag him to the gallows.

For some minutes the squatter increased his lead, and then a sudden tumult behind announced that the hounds had struck his fresher trail; then an increase of the baying, and a triumphant inflection running through it, showed another startling fact.

The hounds had been unleashed.

Then, indeed, was there great need that Burt Hadshaw should dash madly over bog and hummock, for who cares to encounter a bloodhound in a grapple, or to be treed that the dog's master may work his will?

The squatter was strong and enduring, but he was no longer a young man and no one realized better than he that he must sooner or later succumb unless he could throw his pursuers off the track; so all his efforts were addressed to that point.

Straight toward the dreaded depths of the swamp went the squatter. Once there, all was favorable for throwing his pursuers off the track. Miniature rivers and lagoons were abundant, and his trail could be easily broken. But what then? In avoiding his present danger he must dare the bogs; he must keep company with the alligators of the dark waters.

The prospect was present, and Hadshaw paused for a moment on a log to shake his fist backward.

"Ay, ay!" he muttered, bitterly, "you hunt me as though I war a wild beast, an' all accuse I'm a 'poor white.' Ef I had ther money o' Bennin'ton, I needn't flee a pace. Curse ye!"

He hurled forth the words bitterly, but a distant view of a yellowish body shooting from the bushes caused him to bound away. And the bay of the bloodhounds came to his ears as he ran: they were gaining in spite of him.

But he was nearing the desired ground; the heart of Copperhead Swamp. What a refuge!—tangled, dark, uneven, wet and dangerous. No wonder tradition made it haunted ground.

For another mile the race went on, but it had grown a terribly momentous one for the squatter. The man-hunters had come so near that he could almost constantly see the hounds, long, lank and tawny, as they shot along the trail. It was a close call.

But nearer still he drew to the water, and dashing through the bushes, he stood on the bank of a lagoon. Then he turned, with a hissing breath welling from his lungs.

"I'll make my mark on the durned critters!" he cried. "I'll—"

A tawny body shot forth from cover; it was the foremost hound. The squatter's rifle sprang to his shoulder; a short, sharp yelp fell from the dog's lips; and then his voice was hushed forever as a bullet went crashing through his brain.

Burt laughed, wheeled, threw his rifle over his shoulder and plunged into the lagoon. The dark water received him with a sullen splash, but he swam bravely. From the bushes other hounds rushed out. One moment they hesitated on the bank and then followed their intended prey.

Bravely they too swam for awhile; but one suddenly uttered a yelp of pain. Burt Hadshaw knew what the sound presaged. He looked around, to see the dark water streaked with red; to see the surviving dogs fleeing and two alligators hovering near where one of their kind had disposed of the foremost dog.

"They'll be arter me next, God help me!" breathed Hadshaw.

He passed a point of land and was safe from the guos of his human pursuers, but he was in a dark and sluggish place, where brute foes were likely to be in plenty.

His anxious eyes detected a black fin cutting the water and steadily approaching him. His jaws closed tightly, as he saw that a collision was inevitable, and his hand dropped to where he kept his knife.

Then despair settled upon him; the weapon was gone. It had been lost during his flight.

Everything seemed to grow black around him. Utterly wearied by his exertions, and without means of defense, he felt that he might as well succumb first as last.

Then he felt himself seized, and his thoughts turned to his wife and daughter. One thought of them—

But what followed was not what he expected. He opened his eyes quickly.

He was in a boat, and a man was standing near him holding an oar in his hand. Clearly he was not a pursuer; he was a full-blooded negro, and of almost gigantic size.

"Cl'ar out, dar!" cried this person. "Go 'way, you grinnin' debbell! I 'clar' ter gracious, I jist despise a 'gator!"

"Hit him hard, Butcher!" laughed another voice.

The squatter turned his head. He saw the speaker, and recognized him. That handsome, laughing face was not to be confused with any other.

"Leopard Luke!" he exclaimed.

The young man turned quickly.

"Hello! so you're with us. I thought your senses had gone up Red river. A close call, Mr. Hadshaw."

The squatter sat erect.

"I owe you a life," he said slowly.

"Well, I opine the alligator would have cut you in two," Leopard Luke admitted.

Hadshaw did not look pleased. He had disliked his rescuer, and had once forbidden him his house, and he was not a man to easily forget an enmity; but as he remembered his changed condition, and how every man's hand seemed against him, he suddenly leaned toward the other.

"Here's my hand, Leopard Luke, if you'll take it. If you've been abroad you must know I'm branded as a murderer, an' mebbe you won't like ter take it."

"Nonsense!" Luke quickly answered. "Do you suppose I am to be influenced by idle reports? We have had words in the past not wholly pleasant, but our ways have been manly. I know you, Burt Hadshaw, and bet on you every time. Take your hand? I faith I will, and welcome you to our swamp home. There's few of us; only myself and Butcher—you know Butcher, don't you?"

"I've see'd him," said Burt grimly, giving the black man his hand. "And now, unless you want ter git inter an infernal muss, you had better take water, an' git outer this. Hear that!"

It was the sound of voices, as his late pursuers shouted to each other. Leopard Luke made a gesture and Butcher dipped his oars and pulled away with a stroke of admirable caution.

"Let me state right away that I know just what they say at the village," Leopard Luke slowly remarked, "and that I'm with you all the way through. Now, Butcher and I have a refuge in this swamp which is the safest place in Missouri for you. Will you accept our hearty offer of its security?"

It was a superfluous question; what hard-pressed fugitive would have done otherwise?

So Butcher rowed on, and as little talking was done the squatter had time to look about him. He felt a kind of awe and dread for those dark depths, but under the present circumstances each gnarled and moss-covered limb seemed a friendly arm.

In due time they reached the same island where we once before visited Butcher in company with Leopard Luke. Then Hadshaw was led to the cabin and liberally fed.

He ate in silence, staring into the fire, but at the end he proved that he had been thinking.

"Thar's danger ter you ef ye befriend me," he said.

"How so?"

"They say I'm a murderer."

"I've had hard things said about me, before now. Let that pass. Innocent or guilty, you shall have shelter here as long as you will stay. The emissaries of the law will find it hard to discover you here, now I assure you. Food is plenty, Butcher is a good cook, and we will never betray you. As for getting ourselves into trouble—bah! I don't give that for the law!"

The speaker snapped his fingers.

"An' you, my black friend; what kin you say?"

"Stay hyar, sah; stay hyar. Nebber think o' leavin'."

Hadshaw was touched.

"You're cl'ar gold, both on ye!" he cried; "cl'ar gold. But ye make no mistake. I'm no murderer; I'm an innocent man. I never killed Elbert Bennin'ton. We met an' quarreled, an' we fit, an' I left him senseless; but I used never a knife, as they say he was killed with, an' except fur markin' his face a bit I did him no hurt. I sw'ar it!"

The squatter lifted one hand upward.

"Burt Hadshaw, we believe you. No man ever accused you of even the smallest meanness before, and I don't heed the clatter of those folks at the hall. We will hide you till it blows over and they're ashamed of accusing an innocent man."

"Leopard Luke, I've misjudged you," Burt answered, his strong voice unsteady. "From this hour we're friends. I should feel a'most content ef 'twur not fur them at my cabin."

The younger man thrust vigorously at the fire to hide the look of satisfaction on his face.

"Never fear for them, Burt, they shall never want for news of you. This very night I'll go to tell them you're safe, and then you can settle down and feel at ease. Don't feel uneasy there."

A momentary doubt passed to Hadshaw's mind, but he discarded it as unworthy. Leopard Luke had been wild and reckless, in his day, but he was a frank and manly fellow and could be trusted. So reasoned the squatter.

The hours wore on without events of importance. Burt's pursuers did not reappear; no one expected they would; and in the dark and silent swamp the fugitive rapidly recovered his old firmness.

He devoted a good deal of time, in talking with Luke, to wondering who had killed Elbert Bennington. He never wavered in his assertions of innocence. He declared he had used nothing but his fists in the encounter, and that some other person must have dealt the knife-blow.

If he told the truth, his question was indeed timely—Who was the murderer of Elbert Bennington?

CHAPTER VII.

"THE MAN BY THE NAME OF SMITH."

SHERIFF GOODROD returned from his man-hunt wet, mud-stained, exhausted and unsuccessful.

"We didn't get him," he acknowledged, to Hugh, "but that ain't sayin' he got scot cl'ar. He tuk ter ther drink, ez I said, but from ther way ther alligators gobbled up ther dorg I ain't prepared ter say they didn't gobble Burt Hadshaw. I'm r'ally afeerd sech is ther case, an' that jestice is defeated. Moreover, I'm afeerd you'll blame us fur losin' two o' your fine dorgs."

"That is a mere trifle, Mr. Goodrod," Bennington evenly answered. "I now wish to inform you that the message sent by me to the St. Louis detective agency has been answered. I have received a dispatch which reads: 'Expect Mr. Smith, of our corps, to-night.'"

"A detective!" echoed Ben Goodrod.

"Yes."

"What's he goin' ter do?"

There was a strong dissatisfaction in Goodrod's voice and manner.

"Assist in the case."

"Is he a good rifle-shot, and does he know all about Copperhead Swamp?" asked the sheriff, with ill-concealed venom.

"That will not be a part of his duty. I supposed you knew what detectives were for."

"What kin they do in this case?" cried Mr. Goodrod, with energy. "Thar ain't nothin' secret about it; nothin' fur a long-nosed outsider ter ferret out. Ther hull thing bez simmered down ter ther ketchin' o' Burt Hadshaw. Can the man by ther name o' Smith help us thar?"

"I see you do not approve of having Mr. Smith."

"No more nor I do ther havin' o' a fifth wheel ter a wagon, Mr. Bennington."

"You have not looked far enough into this case, Mr. Goodrod. You take it for granted that Mr. Hadshaw committed the crime. So do I, but it is not proved. Some of those who went with you to the cabin declare that while the squatter acknowledged being here, he denied all knowledge of a knife in the case."

"What o' that?" interrupted the sheriff.

"He acknowledged the fight."

"These men argue that while the knife of Hadshaw was broad-bladed, the fatal weapon must have been narrow and slender. There is some reason in that, though it is not necessarily of importance. Hadshaw may have done his work thus to blind us. Again, the men ask, 'What was his motive?' Here we are all at sea. Yet again, Mr. Sheriff, the social circle to which my brother belonged will expect to see every exertion put forth. Hence, the coming of the St. Louis detective."

"An' you expect ther man by ther name o' Smith ter do wonders?"

There was a sneer in the sheriff's voice which amounted to insolence, but Hugh Bennington preserved his usual calmness. If he could remain indifferent to the going and coming of human life, he certainly could to a local official's petty jealousy.

"He will be given a chance, Mr. Goodrod," he answered, arising to intimate that the interview was at an end.

And the sheriff straightway sought his home and went to bed, informing his wife that "a trespasser, by ther name o' Smith, was about ter settle on his roost, an' he wanted ter be in condition fur ther feather-pullin'."

Hugh was alone in his room when the detective was announced. He directed the servant to admit him, and the stranger appeared without much delay.

The two men stood face to face for the first time in their lives. The new-comer was a young man, his looks indicating about thirty years, but he was evidently past the froth and foam of early life. Standing there he revealed a medium-sized, but well-knit figure, with plenty of muscle; and his face was broad, strong, composed and, in a manly way, handsome.

There was a brief pause, for Hugh Bennington was undoubtedly studying his man, but the latter spoke when the door closed, his voice as calm as Hugh's own.

"I am from St. Louis. My name is Smith," he deliberately announced.

Bennington hastened to apologize for his lapse from good manners and showed his guest to a seat. Mr. Smith sat down and the eyes of the two again met. Hugh recognized in the detective a mind as strong as his own.

Inquiry revealed the fact, if such it was, that Smith knew next to nothing about the case, so Hugh told him all that was known to the public, forgetting no detail.

The amount of it was that Elbert Bennington went into the garden that fatal night and was murdered. Circumstances pointed to Burt Hadshaw as the guilty man, and he had fled to the cover of Copperhead Swamp.

"What could have been his motive?" Smith asked. "You say your brother had been his friend; that they had hunted together?"

"Such is the fact. I cannot guess his motive, but he admitted his spite to Sheriff Goodrod, as I said before. More than this, he admitted the fight."

"But denied using the knife."
 "That was natural."
 "It would have been more natural to have denied the whole affair."
 Hugh Bennington's eyes were raised quickly.
 "What do you suspect?" he demanded.
 "I? Nothing."
 "Yet you made a point. If Hadshaw committed the murder why did he admit the fight? Why didn't he deny being on the grounds altogether?"
 "The conduct of a criminal is beyond comprehension, made up as it is of subtle cunning and utter stupidity. This Burt Hadshaw is like all others, dare say. Who compose his family?"
 "His wife and daughter, Relva."
 "Pretty?"
 "Yes."
 "Had your brother ever noticed her particularly?"

"Elbert!" repeated Hugh, in amazement.
 "My dear sir, you are mad. He was a Bennington; she a poor white, so-called. She is none the worse for that, but Elbert would have feared the voice of the world even if he fancied the squatter's daughter."

Mr. Smith's face did not change. It was impossible to say whether he was convinced or not, and Bennington's opinion that he had met a man of more than ordinary ability increased.

The interview, however, amounted to little more than to make Smith acquainted with the case. After that he went with Hugh to view the lifeless form in the other room, and from there to the scene of the tragedy.

This done, the detective announced that he would go out alone and "feel the public pulse." Hugh understood this to be a vague way of saying he was to seek for news by the way, and promptly acquiesced.

It was growing dark when he returned and he was just in time for the evening meal. He sat at a table with Hugh and Augusta Warburton, the lady who had been betrothed but never wedded.

That she grieved deeply for Elbert was plain, though her sorrow was not of the loud, spasmodic kind. She had a dear, refined, attractive face, and Mr. Smith was not long in giving her a place in his esteem.

Evidently, Hugh Bennington might have said the same. Subdued and grave as all were, there was an air in which the master of the house rendered her the simplest attentions which spoke not only of sympathy for her as the woman his deceased brother had selected, but as one he heartily respected himself.

At least, so the detective decided.

When the men were alone in the library Smith calmly said:

"I have investigated my suspicion that your brother might have known Relva Hadshaw."

Hugh raised his head haughtily.

"And found it unfounded."

"On the contrary, it was correct. Your brother, when a hunting companion of the squatter, also placed himself temporarily on terms of intimacy with Relva. There are plenty of men and women who have seen them walking together, and talking and laughing freely."

Bennington's cold nature stirred to sudden fire. He brought his clinched hand down on the table forcibly.

"These tattling fools lie!" he exclaimed. "I have no doubt Burt Hadshaw committed the murder deliberately, but these gossipers—Bah! they never mentioned this flirtation before the tragedy, and this sudden sharpening of their eyes is as much to my late brother's harm as that of the squatter. Look for a motive, Mr. Smith, in some other quarter than through Relva Hadshaw."

Hugh's voice had fallen back to its usual deliberate tone, but the man by the name of Smith did not appear influenced by either.

"We will see," he remarked, evenly.

And he fully intended to see, without fear or favor. If he found that the embryotic step in the late tragedy lay in Elbert Bennington's folly, he did not intend to let the family wealth and position blind his eyes or prevent his decision.

Nothing could have been more timely than the application of a negro at this point who said he had come to announce a new discovery.

"We found dis yer in de swamp jess afore dark," he explained, holding out a white paper.

Hugh took it, looked long and earnestly, while even his self-command could not hide consternation and chagrin from appearing on his face; then he handed it to Smith.

The latter found it to be a letter, and we need only add that it was the same quoted in our first chapter to show its importance.

"Where did you get that?" Hugh unsteadily asked.

"In de swamp. 'Twas near whar Burt Hadshaw come along, dat night, an' we think he must have dropped it."

"There can be no doubt," said Smith, quietly. "Here we see exactly what sent Hadshaw to this place. It is quite probable that he did not harbor particularly revengeful thoughts against your brother until he read this letter—"

"And he did not read it until just before the

appointed wedding," interrupted Hugh. "I see now where we must place the blame. This girl drove him to it!"

The speaker's fingers worked as though he would have liked to have Relva in his grasp at that time.

Smith did not answer, but with an unmoved exterior he again perused the letter.

"I'll have this matter settled," continued Hugh, in a manner which, though subdued, was full of ominous purpose. "I'll call on the girl before I sleep!"

The detective looked up from his letter.

"For what purpose?"

"To show her that her share in the crime is known and to compel her to confess."

"I beg that you will do nothing of the kind. Secretly used, this letter may be a weapon of justice; openly flaunted, it will fall to the level of a weak reed."

"Your argument is hardly plausible. Is not the evidence already strong enough against Hadshaw? Here is his motive; this letter tells all. Next, he was seen on my grounds by the negro, and he inquired for Elbert. Lastly, he admits the fight. Why should we seek for further proof?"

It did, indeed, seem as though justice might rest her case on the evidence already found, but the man named Smith was not ready to accept the world's verdict. If he did, his occupation was gone in the Bennington case.

CHAPTER VIII.

RELVA HAS VISITORS.

AN hour later Hugh left the Hall and started for Burt Hadshaw's cabin. Smith, finding him resolved to confront the squatter's daughter, had quietly withdrawn his opposition and Hugh had seen him settled in his room and yawning at the cosy-looking bed before he left.

Yet it remains a fact that, as Hugh strode along, a light form followed in his rear, keeping at just such a distance, and using almost Indian-like skill.

This follower was Detective Smith, but why he acted such a part, concealing his movements from Hugh, was not so clear. Possibly he went to protect Hugh from harm, but as he had seen that individual place a revolver in his pocket it did not seem as though a guard was needed.

Still the man named Smith kept him company on the trail and Hugh knew it not.

At about the time Hugh started, Mrs. Hadshaw and Relva were sitting alone in their humble cabin. They sat in silence and in sorrow. A well-meaning neighbor had told them the result of the forenoon's pursuit and for all they knew Burt Hadshaw was then dead. In either case they had ample occasion for sorrow, for what hope was there that the humble squatter would escape the gallows if captured?

The opinions of the devoted women never wavered. They had not heard a full account of what had occurred from Hadshaw, but he had sworn in their presence that he had done no murder and they believed him.

Years might come and go, and Copperhead Swamp forever keep the secret of his fate, but they would never doubt him.

Sitting thus, in silence and sorrow, they were wholly unprepared for the appearance of a man who emerged from the inner room in a cautious way and stood with his finger on his lips, but both recognized him.

"Leopard Luke!" Relva faintly exclaimed.

"The very same, but whisper it softly. Your house is watched by Ben Goodrod's tools, and as I wormed through unseen by them we must keep the secret. I come from Burt Hadshaw, and his safety—"

The pale-faced wife sprung forward and caught his hand.

"Burton!" she exclaimed. "Tell me—does he live?"

"He's alive and as well as any of us, my dear madam," Luke heartily answered. "He is at my cabin at present, and as that's the only safe place in Missouri, he'll stay there for the present."

"And you came from him?"

"I did. He bade me give his love to you, Mrs. Hadshaw, and to—Relva."

He made a pause before the last word, and looked at her in such a way that she could no longer remain inactive. She advanced and gave him her hand, expressing her gratitude, and triumph was plainly visible on his changeable face.

The first greetings over, Luke impressed upon their minds the necessity of the utmost caution. Goodrod, while believing that the squatter had perished in the swamp, had resolved not to leave a stone unturned to effect his capture if he lived, and the possibility that he would try to secretly return to the cabin had led to the posting of the watchers outside.

Cunningly as they believed themselves hidden, Leopard Luke had discovered the fact at once, and sharply as they believed themselves watching, he had entered at the rear of the cabin unseen by them.

He came as a friend in need to the women. Once, Burt Hadshaw had set the seal of his condemnation on him, pointing out the fact that he

was not only wild and reckless, but a branded horse-thief, but he had saved Burt's life, and won his way to the favor of all at a bound.

So the past was forgotten, and in a subdued voice Leopard Luke told the story of the squatter's escape. It was hard work to convince them that he was then safe, but even they knew what a deadly place the interior of Copperhead Swamp was, and tried to believe that it would be a journey of death to his enemies if they attempted to find him there.

The career of Leopard Luke had been full of moments which had aroused his pride in himself. When he rode at the head of his horse-thieves, sitting on the spotted animal which had obtained for him his *sobriquet*, he had felt that no lot could be prouder, or more lofty, than his.

Yet, in a certain degree, this night rivaled the old occasions. At one bound he had gained the confidence and regard of the unsuspicious women, and in a quiet way he was a hero again. He looked at the face of Relva, which had for the time assumed its old color, and felt a thrill of hope. It was the ruling passion of his life to marry her. For the fact that she was immeasurably his superior in point of honor he cared nothing. Lovers usually fix their gaze on the goal, and push on as best they can, and Leopard Luke was not one to weigh the means so long as success perched on his banner.

They were still sitting there when an imperious rap sounded at the door. The trio arose simultaneously.

"Sheriff Goodrod!" gasped Mrs. Hadshaw.

"In that case, the inner room is the place for me," Luke coolly observed. "I'll go there, and you need have no fear for me. Open the door at once; delay will arouse suspicions."

He spoke the last word at the connecting door and then disappeared. The wisdom of his last assertion was evident and the women arose to the emergency. They must now divert suspicion from the man who had eased their aching hearts.

Relva hastened to the outer door, and just as the imperious rap was repeated, opened it. Then she started back in amazement and alarm.

Hugh Bennington stood before her.

As she receded he advanced and entered, closing the door behind him. The women stood terrified at seeing in their home the man they felt must be their enemy, and the sight of his dark, stern face did not serve to lessen their fears.

He fixed his gaze on Relva, noting her beauty with a bitterness born of an unjust feeling that she was to blame for it. This, then, was the girl who had led Elbert Bennington to forget his station in life and cloud his reputation.

"I have come to see you, Miss Hadshaw," he said, curtly.

"Yes, sir," she managed to gasp.

"There is no need of roundabout words; the relationship of our respective families at this moment are too well understood to need reference. I refer to the past; to the time when my brother, Elbert, was alive."

He faltered a little at the last words. No one replied; it was yet too early to expect composure from them.

"I have brought a letter I wish you to read," Hugh continued. "It is a copy of one left in a safer place. Read!"

He extended the paper, and Relva needed but a few moments to see that it was indeed a copy of that letter which had wrought so much misery.

As she lowered it, he again spoke.

"What have you to say?"

"What do you wish me to say?"

"To tell the truth. Was there indeed a love-affair between my late brother and yourself?"

His tone aroused Mrs. Hadshaw to rebellion.

"If it is a love-affair when a man deliberately breaks a young girl's heart, then there was one," she bitterly answered. "Elbert Bennington has left his trail on our hearth-stone like that of a serpent."

"Hush!" he said, solemnly. "You speak of the dead. Malign not those who cannot defend themselves. He cannot tell how he was led on, lured on."

The unjust accusation destroyed what remained of Relva's courage. She sunk into a chair and burst into tears, but Mrs. Hadshaw faced their visitor with the dignity of a mother.

"Sir," she said, "Elbert Bennington never came here by invitation. He came scores of times before he ever saw Relva alone. When he did, it was because he accosted her when she walked in the wood. The meeting was not of her seeking; she never led him on; she tried to avoid him as one far above her in the social scale. Sir, look at my child and tell me if she appears like a designing woman. Ah! you would not dare make the charge if we were rich; you would have only fair words then. But poverty is a mill wherein are ground the hearts of those ill-favored in life."

Hugh Bennington did not answer at once. He was not convinced or awed by this indignant reply, but he felt that there were two sides to the tragic drama. At any rate, he could not expect Relva to confess that she had plotted for a position in his family.

"Let me hear how it was," he said, more gently.

At that moment neither of them stopped to think that they might possibly do Burt Hadshaw an injury by the confession; they had been wronged, and they proceeded to clear themselves.

And under these circumstances, in the humble cabin, with the wife and daughter of the man charged with having slain his brother, and with officers of the law outside watching for the husband and father, Hugh heard the story of his brother's unhappy past.

He made few interruptions and no more charges, but listened carefully to all. Neither did he express an opinion as to whether his charges were verified or disproved.

At the end he asked a question concerning the squatter, but Mrs. Hadshaw was as discreet a wife as a devoted mother.

"We must decline to say anything concerning Burton. We have nothing to conceal, but silence is the right and policy of every accused person."

"Very well; I did not come here to entice you to commit any indiscretion. I hardly know why I did come."

It is doubtful if he knew he spoke the last words. He was looking at Relva steadily, but it was impossible to tell his thoughts by his face.

After a brief pause he abruptly arose.

"I'll go now," he said. "My presence cannot give you any pleasure."

And then, without another word or look, he strode from the cabin, and his footsteps were heard dying away. It was noticed, however, that he closed the door without the slightest jar.

Mrs. Hadshaw and Relva were looking at each other mutely, when Leopard Luke came out of the inner room.

"Curse the spy!" he muttered, with a scowl.

"You have foiled him well."

"In what way?"

"He came here for evidence to hang Burt Hadshaw, but precious little he made by it."

"He did not press us to tell anything."

"Your manner showed him it would be useless. Yet, he came to trap you; to make you betray anything Burt may have said in his anger. The talk about the letter was a blind. Oh! he is a crafty villain!"

The women had not retained a very bad opinion of Hugh, but, with the case thus presented, they became more bitter than ever.

Luke remained half an hour longer, uttering many cautions, and then left the cabin. There was no evidence that he was seen until he reached the wood, but, once there, a hand was suddenly laid on his shoulder.

CHAPTER IX.

THE MAN NAMED SMITH SEEKS INFORMATION.

LEOPARD LUKE wheeled like a flash, his hand falling on his knife, but the air of the man he thus confronted was at once so peaceable and matter-of-fact that he did not draw it. He could not see his neighbor's face, but he at once decided that he did not live near Copperhead Swamp.

"Fine night, though a little dark," the stranger carelessly observed.

"Yes, but the air is good."

Luke answered promptly, for it occurred to him that he had been mistaken for one of the watchers.

"If you're not busy, suppose we walk a short distance. I think I have two cigars."

The suggestion pleased Luke, who was ready enough to leave the place, and after both cigars were going they walked on side by side.

The stranger made some remark about the trees above them, and told what kind of trees he had seen in other places, but as they reached a little opening he calmly paused.

"How is Burt Hadshaw?" he evenly asked.

Luke was not to be betrayed into a start.

"I suppose that all depends on circumstances," he answered, laughing. "If he's dead, as Goodrod believes, it's hard to say just how he is."

"Goodrod is mistaken if he thinks him dead. You and I know better, my friend."

"You and I?"

"Yes."

The stranger puffed his cigar nonchalantly.

"Perhaps you know it, but I don't," Luke said, his voice less bland than before. "Is there anything new?"

"Just an iota. Hadshaw is in Copperhead Swamp, and the man who is acting as his host has this night been to the women over yonder with his report."

Leopard Luke made no start, no betraying movement; but in that instant he decided that the cool stranger must die before he left him.

"Was the man captured?" he asked.

"No. Only one man knew of his visit. This man was a humble person named Smith. He saw the messenger leave the cabin, followed him, and—here we are."

The gentleman named Smith coolly knocked the ash from his cigar, and went on smoking.

"You have a foggy way of speaking," said

Luke, in a peculiar voice; "but if I grasp your meaning, you are Smith—"

"I am Smith."

"And you accuse me of bringing news from Hadshaw?"

"Exactly."

"I'll trouble you to prove it."

"That's easily done. You were in the cabin when Hugh Bennington called, but you took refuge in the inner room. When he was gone, you emerged and gave the women sundry cautions, which I can repeat if you wish."

Luke glared at him with an ominous glitter in his blue eyes.

"Who in perdition are you?" he roughly demanded.

"In Missouri I am Smith. As to who I am in perdition, I sincerely hope my name isn't on the books."

"Are you a detective?"

"Yes."

Luke forced a laugh, and in this way attempted to destroy Mr. Smith's opinion. His effort was creditable, but the detective smoked on in calm indifference, and it was plain he did not waver.

Then, more strongly than before, Luke saw that only death could make Smith a safe man to have at large.

"Well, suppose your suspicion is correct, what are you going to do about it? Will you arrest me?"

"Arrest you? Nonsense! No. Why should I? I am going with you to your home and see Burt Hadshaw!"

"I usually choose my companions."

"So do I, and I've chosen you. You don't clearly understand, I think. I don't ask your permission to go with you, nor force my company upon you, but when you go on I'll jog along with you."

"And play dog?"

"We won't dispute about empty words."

Leopard Luke looked fixedly at his companion. He understood him at last. He intended to fasten himself unto him like a veritable bloodhound and follow to where Burt Hadshaw was. The idea was absurd, in Luke's opinion, since he carried a revolver and a knife and knew how to use them; but it annoyed him nevertheless. Smith was so cool in every respect that he already hated him worse than any other person living.

"Just as you say," he answered, after another pause. "I have told you I ain't what you claim, but if you don't believe it, follow me and see. I'm going."

"Wait."

"Well?"

"Your idea is to get me away from the hearing of those at the cabin and then shoot me. Let me notify you that this won't work. If you try it, you'll get the worst of it. Leopard Luke, let me ask if you remember witnessing some shooting done by a detective at St. Louis while you were a prisoner there?"

"I remember."

"Well, that detective was myself. I now shoot better than I did then, as I will convince you if you are ugly. Now, go on, but, take notice, don't try any games."

Leopard Luke did go on, but it was in a sullen mood. He remembered the remarkable shooting referred to and knew he was no match for the quiet gentleman named Smith. Already he feared him—a new feeling for the horse-thief—and he knew not what to do.

They went for a mile and then Luke sat down on a log. Smith at once sat beside him. The silence between them was not broken, however. Luke was in a smothered rage. He felt weak and helpless in the hands of his enemy, and surely it was an unenviable situation. What should he do? It would be madness to go on and let Smith follow to the swamp island, but how could he be shaken off?

He glared at the detective with his usually jovial face twisted into a furious expression, but the latter seemed unconscious of the fact and placidly smoked his second cigar.

"You scoundrel!" Luke finally burst forth.

"Do you think you will make this work?"

"Beyond a doubt," Smith calmly answered.

"You won't. One of us will die here in the swamp rather."

"I advise you not to suicide."

Luke scowled deeper than ever and the war of words went on. But neither of them noticed that, as they talked, a dark form was moving toward them with a slow and stealthy crawl. Had they seen it, they might for the time have made mutual cause against it. But they saw nothing; they did not suspect that danger was near.

Suddenly the dark form arose, shot forward and dropped. It fell on Smith and he was beaten to the ground by the weight.

Luke sprang to his feet. He saw the detective prostrate with a panther tearing at his throat, or seeming to do so, and with the one idea in his mind that the chance for flight had arrived he sprang to his feet and dashed away at full speed.

But what of the man named Smith?

No coward was he; and he no sooner realized his danger than he took measures to save him-

self. His left hand gripped the throat of the beast, keeping his deadly jaws from his own neck, while at the same moment his other hand developed a knife from somewhere about his person.

Then with the snarl of the panther was mingled the dull thud of successive blows.

For a while it seemed anybody's battle, and then the body of the beast was cast aside and Smith arose.

"Rather a close call," he coolly observed, "but, barring a few scratches, the court is itself. But Leopard Luke is gone."

There was no doubt about this matter, and the detective did not linger at the place or attempt to find his escaped prey. His plan had failed because of the interference of the panther, which had paid for it with his life, and if Luke was seen again it would be creeping back for a secret shot.

So Mr. Smith turned and retraced his steps to the Hadshaw cabin. The light had been extinguished, all was silent, and Smith was satisfied that he could learn no more by remaining astir. Such being the case he returned to Bennington Hall, regained his room without discovery and passed the remainder of the night peacefully.

At the breakfast-table there was no sign of what had been done the night before. Neither Smith nor Hugh looked any worse for their journeying, and private matters were not referred to until they were time.

Augusta Warburton pored at the table as on the previous night. Cemed an irony of fate that she should be "har" by the tragedy of her life to assume a sterner and kinder fortune would have made hers beyond question; but the mother of Hugh lay in her chamber dangerously ill and Augusta was to remain until she was better.

Over their cigars, Hugh and Smith had another talk. The former told of his visit to the Hadshaw cabin and what had been said, but neither advanced the idea that the squatter might be innocent. Instead, Hugh plainly said that the motive of the murder had been discovered and it only remained to capture Hadshaw.

If the man named Smith had an opinion in the world he did not advance it then. He let Hugh do nearly all the talking, said nothing about his own adventure of the previous night, and seemed to be more interested in smoking than anything else.

Later they returned to the house. Possibly Hugh began to think that his companion was more ornamental than useful. He yawned two or three times, and when Augusta was seen passing the door, went out and joined her.

The sound of their voices continuing near, Mr. Smith coolly arose, walked to the door, and prepared to act the watcher and listener.

Hugh and Miss Warburton were standing side by side. She was calm but grave. Bennington's face, on the contrary, was a study. There was such a mixture of gravity and something else that Smith was reminded of the sun behind a cloud, or a face behind a mask.

"He loves her!" internally decided the detective.

There did, indeed, seem to be some ground for the belief. Hugh's face was completely changed. It was no longer stern and forbidding; it seemed to be utterly metamorphosed. A kindly light had come to the cold eyes; a gentle smile was on the stern mouth.

Smith stroked his mustache.

"So, he loves the woman who would have been his brother's wife had his brother lived. I suspected as much. Now, what does it signify?"

For once the placidly calm look was gone from the detective's face. His brows were contracted, and in looking at the two persons before him he seemed trying to look into the future.

He saw no love-scene; nothing that was not in keeping with the recent death of Elbert Bennington; but he could have sworn there was more than kindness expressed in Hugh's face.

"If he loves her now, he must have loved her before his brother died," reasoned Smith. "The natural result is that he is a gainer by that death. He is his brother's heir and all the Bennington plantation is now his. More than this, he can now aspire to the hand of Miss Warburton. I wonder if he feels deep sorrow because Elbert is gone?"

A cynical expression crossed the face of the man called Smith, but as the interview ended outside he returned to his seat and was as composed as ever when Hugh re-entered the room. Neither mentioned what had just occurred.

CHAPTER X.

ANOTHER MAN-HUNT.

DURING the time which had elapsed since the arrival of the St. Louis detective, Sheriff Ben Goodrod had been far from idle, though he had not been seen at Bennington Hall. That forenoon, however, he was announced and Hugh bade the negro show him in.

Mr. Goodrod entered. There had, however, a vast change come over him. He was no

longer the frank, happy-go-lucky official known to the vicinity. Instead, he entered with his lank form drawn to its utmost height, and with a way of handling himself which was not unlike what is said to be the case when a man swallows a crow-bar.

"Good-morning, Mr. Sheriff," said Hugh, indifferently.

"Good-morning, sir," returned Goodrod, with an emphasis on the last word. "I trust the horizon o' ther day finds you wrastlin' with good health."

"Tolerably so," answered Hugh, looking surprised. "Sheriff Goodrod, Mr. Smith, a St. Louis detective."

The detective arose, ready to give his hand, but there was no opportunity vouchsafed.

"I dar' say Mr. Smith, o' St. Louis, is wall," haughtily answered Mr. Goodrod, and with this remark he walked to a seat some distance from the two.

This unmistakable cut brought a frown to Hugh's face, but Smith smiled and made a quick gesture. He had seen local officials take to jealousy before then and could afford to overlook it.

"I hev come ter elucidate my report, sir," continued the sheriff.

"Ah! what is new?"

"We, ther men o' this hyar town, hev a scheme in project which we are reassured, sir, will envelop Burt Hadshaw in ther iron jaws o' justice ef he 's alive."

"What is that?"

"A search-at-ter hez been formulated, sir, which will turn in y log in Copperhead Swamp fur ther assene o. We're a-gwine through it like ther fer the der mongst a fam'ly o' children, sir."

"Do you really think Hadshaw is alive, Mr. Goodrod?" asked the detective.

"Ev'ry man has his opinion, Mr. Smith, o' St. Louis."

"Then I suppose you have one?"

"I hev, as I all elucidate at ther proper time, sir."

"Your search-at-ter Copperhead Swamp nearly betrays which your mind runs, Mr. Goodhead."

"Goodrod is my name, sir."

"I beg your pardon. Well, don't let me interrupt. You were talking with Mr. Bennington."

"I shall accompany your search-party, sheriff," Hugh quietly said.

"We shall be honored by your corporation, sir," Mr. Goodrod announced. "Perhaps Mr. Smith, o' St. Louis, will also go along."

"Quite probable."

"He may be ther one ter ketch Burt," Goodrod added, with a halo of sarcasm around his brow.

"That's what I'm here for," Smith good-humoredly replied.

"Ondoubtedly you will succeed—ondoubtedly."

"Sheriff, I don't like your way of speaking," said Hugh, bluntly. "It is clear that you are prejudiced against Mr. Smith. Such a thing is unworthy of an officer of justice, and as my guest I must request good usage of him from all."

"My respex is profound," Goodrod promptly answered.

"Certainly, sir, certainly. We understand each other, and are pulling together shoulder to shoulder. Say no more, Mr. Bennington."

Smith dismissed the subject with a wave of his hand, and conversation was more friendly after that.

The hour for the start was near at hand, and Hugh and the detective prepared for their part. Goodrod had arranged matters with some skill. The first half of the journey must be made by land, unless a wide detour was taken; the last half by water. To meet this emergency the sheriff had sent boats around by some of his men, who were to be in waiting at a certain point. After that, the depths of the swamp were to be explored.

Mr. Smith, sinking to the level of a mere spectator as soon as he joined the party, was a good deal amused at the antics of Goodrod. The latter was considered a great man by his fellow-citizens, and they bowed to his will accordingly; but on the present occasion he was unusually capricious, even for a great man.

Everything he could do to impress the man named Smith with his importance was done, and ostentatiously done too.

The march through the wood was uneventful, but when they reached the point where Goodrod had previously lost the squatter, the matter grew more interesting. The boats were on hand, the party embarked, and the journey was resumed.

After that, it was a blind search. Few of them had ever passed the point; the country beyond was an unknown water; and with all the old superstitions revived, there were those who looked about and expected to see ghosts walking the water, or something of the kind.

Water leaves no trail; therefore they had no means of knowing that another boat—a small one with a single occupant—was receding before their advance, and going at a rate of speed

which was rapidly widening the intervening space.

The lone boatman's skin was black, his form was gigantic; in brief, it was Butcher.

"Dey won't get 'im," he said, as he plied his oars. "Dey don't know Copperhead Swamp ez I do, an' I kin hide him from an army. Golly! I nebber thought it would be fixed dis way. Ef de ole massa was alibe he would go mad, an' I reckon he's a-turnin' in his coffin now. Neber you mind, ole massa; Butcher's hyar an' he'll look fur de honor o' de family."

Muttering thus, the negro paddled on until the raised form of the swamp island arose before him. He drove the boat ashore, secured it and then strode toward the cabin. He entered and found Leopard Luke and Hadshaw playing cards.

"Dey's a-comin', sah!" Butcher announced.

The squatter made one bound and seized his rifle.

"Let ther blood-suckers come!" he cried. "Thar's death afoot fur ther critter thet lays hands on me. I don't go ter town ter be hung fur another man's murderin', I don't. Whar be they, nigger?"

His face was like that of a murderer at bay, whatever may have been in his heart, but Leopard Luke kept his place coolly.

"There's no danger, Burt; sit down," he said. "If by any chance they find this island it'll take them a half a day, and I'll bet my hat they don't see the island anyhow. What do you say, Butcher?"

"No danger, I reckon; leastwise, not right away. Et takes practice ter navumgate Copperhead Swamp."

The squatter laughed harshly.

"I'm a fool," he said, putting his gun away. "I'm afeerd my narves are unstrung or I wouldn't hev weakened so. Let it pass. Speak in' o' ther swamp, how do you larn it, Butcher? They say you runned away from Hugh Bennington's fayther when ye war a good bit younger than now. How was it?"

Hadshaw evidently spoke to give the impression that he was very much at ease, but his purpose was lost on Butcher.

"I runned away," he said, slowly, his eyes cast down. "Yas, I runned away, and I've lived in ther swamp for thirty year."

"Still, you used ter go ter see ole man Bennington in his last days."

"Yas."

"Ef you war a runaway, it's curious he didn't lay hands on you."

"He forgave me," said Butcher, hastily; and then he took his rifle and turned away. At the door he paused, looked at Luke and added:

"I'll keep good watch, massa."

With these words he was gone.

Leopard Luke laughed with an inflection of anger.

"It is mighty queer what positions Butcher takes up. He had ample cause to hate old Jay Bennington; I know that. They were about of an age, and when something like seventeen Jay had Butcher flogged for some small misdemeanor. The negro took to the swamp and they couldn't find him. He has lived here ever since, yet Jay Bennington was his friend in his later days. They patched up the quarrel somehow and Butcher remained here. Jay was a queer chicken, however. Twice, he has helped me out of trouble; the last time when I was arrested and sentenced for running away thirty odd horses, with five of Jay's among them. What did the old man do but get me a pardon? I can't understand it."

Luke stared at the wall, busy with his conundrum, but Burt Hadshaw was not at ease. He fancied every sound to be the footsteps of his pursuers; guilty or innocent, his fears were taking revenge on him. Yet, woe be to the man who tried to capture him! He had firmly resolved to fight like a tiger, and he had the means of doing it.

He finally aroused Luke by suggesting that they go out together and the younger man did not object. They joined Butcher where the boat was beached and stood listening for sounds from the man-hunters. Luke was careless, confident and at his ease; Hadshaw, worn, weary and anxious, his fingers moving restlessly on his rifle-barrel; Butcher, composed, but anxious, his eyes turning ever and anon toward Luke.

To him he evidently looked with affection and a sense of deep inferiority.

"Let me go out in de boat an' look fur dem," he finally suggested.

"We'll all go," answered Luke, suddenly. "Come, Burt, get in and let Charon use the blade."

The squatter hesitated. Worn by his misfortunes, he was afraid to go and afraid to remain behind. One moment he hesitated; then, ashamed of his fear, stepped in with a brief air of bravado.

"Row on, boyee; row on. We'll go ter battle!"

Luke winked secretly at Butcher and the boat was shoved off. Never had oars been handled more skillfully than the negro handled them then. The water gave forth only the faintest sound at their passage; they might almost have been taken for a phantom crew and a phantom

bark and the ghostly tales of Copperhead Swamp have been confirmed.

But Burt Hadshaw, sitting in the stern of the craft and nervously fingering his rifle did not look happy enough for a ghost, though he had a pallor and a hunted look which made one wonder if he wasn't moving that way. Misfortune was plainly telling on him.

They went on in their secret way until the squatter suddenly raised his head. At the same moment Butcher lifted his oars. The sound of voices had been heard; it was now plainly audible and mingled with the regular dip of oars.

Hadshaw looked at Luke with inquiry, defiance, fear and, possibly, a little of some other emotion visible. The latter made a gesture and Butcher noiselessly paddled toward the point of danger.

"Whar away?" demanded the squatter, a sudden light appearing in his eyes.

"We want a squint at the enemy."

"Hark ye, young man!—no foul play," warned Burt. "Thar's a reward fur me, I make no doubt, but it'll be death fur him ez tries ter 'arn it."

"Nonsense, Hadshaw; I hope you don't suspect me?"

"I only give ye fa'r warnin'."

The eyes of the hunted man wandered restlessly about, as though he had to watch both of his companions, as well as for the enemy at large, but as they floated nearer the man-hunters there was no chance for reply.

Butcher raised the oars and they glided under cover.

CHAPTER XI.

WHAT THEY FOUND.

SCREENED by bushes which were like a veil, the three men looked out at the pursuers. Thus far had Sheriff Goodrod's party penetrated. The official, himself, sat in the foremost boat—there were three—and looked like a general leading his forces in retreat rather than on to victory.

For the man-hunters were not valiant men just at that time. The majority of them believed in the existence of ghosts just as much as they did in that of whisky, and as they had a flask of the one in their pocket there was no reason why the other should not at any moment appear.

If Ben Goodrod was afraid he gave no sign, and Hugh and Mr. Smith, of St. Louis, were certainly calm. The latter smoked his cigar, as usual.

Trying to make a passage near the hidden trio, Goodrod's boat ran upon a hidden obstruction.

"No use," said one of the oarsmen.

"What's thar?" the sheriff asked.

"A snag."

"A sawyer."

"Bones o' a dead man."

These surmises roused Goodrod to sudden anger.

"Bones o' your grandfather!" he irreverently exclaimed. "Do you take this yer fur a graveyard. Hyar, Tom Tubbs, reach down an' see what's thar."

Mr. Tubbs proceeded to obey, though his face was very solemn, but he drew back with a yell:

"Alligator! alligator! Look out, ah!"

Leopard Luke punched Hadshaw facetiously in the ribs, but the man-hunters were not at ease. They eyed the saurian as though he were a ghost until Hugh's voice sharply arose, bidding them use a rifle on him.

"I'm ther man fur that post," said Goodrod, hastily arising; "that is, unless Mr. Smith, of St. Louis, would like a chance."

"Unless you shoot better than you talk, there'll be enough left for me afterward," said Smith, calmly. "Blaze away, Goodyard."

The sheriff darted a fierce look at his rival, and then raised his rifle. The alligator was swimming lazily about, as though critically looking at the crew, and Ben took what he meant should be good aim.

Crack!

The rifle spoke, sending back a duller, heavier echo, and that was all Goodrod knew about it. He saw the water roused to sudden commotion in front of him; there was a rending, crashing sound, and the next moment he arose in the air and went shooting away in a style which would have done credit to an acrobat.

For the saurian painfully wounded and stung to rage, had crushed the boat with one blow and sent the crew flying about wherever they chanced to go.

Thus it was that, as the watchers crouched in their covert, a heavy form came crashing through the bushes and fell squarely in the boat; one of Goodrod's men had found that for which he hunted.

He found something more.

Hadshaw and Butcher were filled with alarm, but Luke dropped on the man like a panther, compressed his throat, and then turned him upon his face. His purpose was to prevent Hadshaw from being discovered.

A look to Butcher was enough, and while great confusion reigned where the boat had

been destroyed, the negro took up his oars, and pulled away in his old, secret style.

In the mean while matters were on a diversified footing on the other side of the bushes. Of those cast into the water nearly all had gained the remaining boats; the only man in peril was Ben Goodrod.

He had alighted in the water, and without injury; but his fears rushed to the front, and he was not long in getting out of it. A huge tree near at hand with an equally large knee, or bunch, on one side of the trunk, offered the only means of escape, and Goodrod was not long in clambering up. He gained the position none too soon, for a second alligator appeared, and coming to a halt just below the sheriff, looked up at him with a decidedly wicked eye.

It is not to Goodrod's discredit to say he was alarmed.

"Help, here—help!" he cried. "Ther infernal varmint is arter my legs. Help, an' be quick about it!"

The saurian did, indeed, seem to look longingly at his lower limbs. They dangled down invitingly, and as Goodrod could neither draw them up nor arise to a standing position himself, his legs were certainly in danger.

"Hold hard, Mr. Goodbush," said the gentleman named Smith, "and we'll be with you in a second. Oars, boys!"

He took the lead in an easy, perfectly calm manner, and as they drew near the alligator, sent a bullet intended for its eye with such effect that the ugly reptile floundered away in haste.

"Now, Mr. Goodyear," said Smith serenely, "we'll take you in. Jump!"

The sheriff jumped, and sat down safely; but his buoyant spirits were gone. For one unhappy moment he had allowed the man to rise superior to the official, and he felt that it had amused Mr. Smith, of St. Louis, not a little when he called for help.

The roll was soon called to make sure that all were there. It was found that all were not there; Samuel Gregg was not to be found—the most careful search failed to show any signs of him, and it was unanimously agreed that he had probably fallen victim to an alligator.

This event cast a deep gloom over the man-hunters. The old residents remembered that they were in a part of the Swamp from which it was asserted no one had ever returned, and there was consternation among the crew. They looked about as though the swamp ghosts were hovering near, and called upon Goodrod to take them back.

That excellent man was a good deal frightened himself, but he lacked the courage to retreat. Hugh and Smith were perfectly at their ease, and while the former urged an advance, the eyes of the St. Louis man were plainly laughing at the sheriff.

Better by far meet the ghosts than Smith's ridicule.

So an advance was ordered, and the search kept up, until the crew flatly mutinied. They had wound about in the labyrinthine passages until they were confused and lost; and the danger of being caught by night roused them to instant action.

Mr. Goodrod was glad of it. He had seen enough of the swamp, and he felt like cheering when his men took such a resolute stand.

And so they turned back. It was a long pull and a wide pull, for they could not hold to a direct course, but we need not dwell on their troubles. Enough to say they finally escaped from the dark lagoons and reached their landing-place.

There a fresh alarm awaited them. A form arose from a log and looked at them dismally. It was a forlorn and woebegone creature, wet, muddy and haggard; but it had the features of Sam Gregg, their lost companion.

Again they were frightened, for they believed they saw a real ghost at last, but Hugh Bennington took charge and brought order out of chaos. It was Sam Gregg in the flesh, as he soon convinced them, but the most dilapidated-looking wretch they had seen for some time.

"I'm a dead man!" said Mr. Gregg, mournfully.

"So you take your turn, do you?" sharply demanded Hugh. "What is it, now?"

"I've seen the ghost of Burt Hadshaw!"

Hugh remembered that Sam had mysteriously covered a mile of water and became attentive.

"Where?"

"Over in the swamp."

"Tell us all about it."

When the request had been repeated several times Samuel came down to business.

"When the alligator struck the boat I was raised and flung aside like a cork. Of course I expected to come down in the water, or in the mouth of an alligator, but I did nothing of the kind. Instead, I was suddenly arrested in my flight through the air, as though in a feather-bed, and then laid softly down. Boys, what do you suppose I saw?"

The majority of the men shivered and their lips framed one word:

"Ghosts!"

"I was lying in a boat, but such a boat! It was white as snow. More than that, the single

occupant was equally white. Still further, it was Burt Hadshaw or his ghost! Boys, I lay there and stared at the white boatman in dead silence while he dipped his oars and rowed away. I was kind of awed at first, but by-and-by I knew 'twas the squatter's ghost and that he was taking me away. Then I was scared, and I tried to leap out of the boat. Boys, I couldn't do it. If I had been chained I wouldn't have been so helpless. I struggled desperately to get away and, failing, saw it all. I was the prisoner of Burt's ghost and it had me in its power!"

Mr. Gregg paused to stare dismally at vacancy, shaking his head, and some of his auditors looked around in search of the ghost.

"Cut it short," said Hugh, curtly. "What was the end?"

"Why—why—why, we finally landed here, I was put ashore by invisible hands and left. The pale boat and the pale boatman faded into air and I was alone. That's all."

Hugh backed Samuel up against a tree.

"Now," he severely said, "we want the truth on this subject."

"You've had it; I swear you have."

"Idiot! Leave your folly and answer me. Have you seen Burt Hadshaw?"

"I've seen his ghost."

And all the eloquence of Hugh and Smith could get no other account of the affair. Gregg was plainly terrified, and he had as plainly been severely used, but he had one unvarying account for his experience.

His companion believed all he said, but Hugh and the detective tried to pick the truth from among the rubbish of his account.

"I believe the squatter lives and that he has seen him," said Hugh. "The fellow must have been hovering near when our boat was destroyed, and it was he who rescued Gregg."

"Rather than see the alligators get him."

"Possibly, though pity don't seem to belong to the man."

"Well," said Smith, slowly, "as long as Hadshaw's alive, I suppose you will turn Copperhead Swamp upside down to get him?"

"Yes."

"I'll help you."

Hugh was thoughtful for a moment.

"I was about to say that there was, perhaps, no reason why you should engage longer in the case. There is no mystery about it; there can be no doubt of Hadshaw's guilt, and it requires swamp men, rather than you or me, to do the rest."

"You are right, and I was about to say that I shall remove to the village, but my superiors will not allow me to abandon the case while the murderer is at large. Naturally, the agency wants all possible glory."

"Such being the case, I must insist on your remaining under my own roof. You will not find so good quarters at the village, and nowhere can you find more liberty. Remain with me, Mr. Smith, and do what you can. I earnestly request it."

Smith watched his companion during this speech without once meeting his eye. There was an air of sincerity about him, yet the detective felt sure he was not wanted at Bennington Hall. Still, the invitation was calmly accepted.

CHAPTER XII.

SMITH HAS TWO STRANGE INTERVIEWS.

THE man-hunters reached home in safety, but they did not appear with colors flying. Instead, if there hadn't been a good deal of bronze on their faces, color would have been rather scarce. They came a badly-frightened crowd, and what they had to relate made the believers in ghostly business revel in horror and delight—two emotions seldom paired.

Hugh Bennington and Mr. Smith, lacking superstition, went to the Hall and supped on more substantial food.

Miss Warburton sat at the table with them and reported Mrs. Bennington more comfortable; so much improved, in fact, that she desired to see Hugh.

Thus it was that Mr. Smith found himself alone with Miss Warburton in the library, immediately after.

"Mr. Smith," said she, abruptly, "do you think this Hadshaw will be captured?"

"Probably it is only a question of time."

"Well, do you think him guilty?"

The man named Smith raised his eyes and met the gaze of his companion. She was looking at him fixedly, as though to read his thoughts, but not so much as the quivering of an eye betrayed him. His calm face had never been calmer.

"I have never heard his guilt doubted," he replied.

"That is not the question. Do you think him guilty?"

"Yes; most certainly I do," Mr. Smith replied.

The lady twisted and retwisted the broad golden ring on her finger; the ring she had worn as Elbert Bennington's affianced; and the diamond sent out little jets of pale flame as the lamp-light touched it. She remained silent so long that the detective again spoke.

"Allow me to inquire why you ask the question? Do you doubt his guilt?"

"Mr. Smith," she said, with startling quickness, "I trust you will not laugh at me, since the case is so serious, when I tell you that I have twice dreamed that Elbert Bennington came to me, as he now lies in that darkened room, and, pointing to his wound, said: 'Burt Hadshaw is not my murderer; seek further!' Twice have I dreamed this, and twice have I become awake at just this point. Now, sir, I beg that you will not smile at me, for I am no believer in dreams ordinarily, but this one is impressed on my mind as by a branding-iron."

The detective did not answer at once, but in silence sat gazing at the face before him. It was one of beauty, refinement, intelligence and subdued power. Clearly, the lady was not one to yield to superstition or to do violence to common-sense. Yet, Smith was not prepared to enlist under the shadowy banner she had raised.

"Naturally," he finally answered, to her last assertion.

"Unnaturally," she amended, with emphasis. "I tell you the impression is so clear as to almost startle me."

"Well, have you a theory to go hand in hand with it?"

"No; and that is why I come to you. You are a detective and an intelligent man. I wish you to look further in this case. Have you heard of any one besides Hadshaw who—who disliked Elbert Bennington?"

"No. They say every one liked him—"

"There was one other person who did not; I am sure of it. Who was it?"

Smith pulled his mustache thoughtfully, and looked at Miss Warburton from under his drooping eyelids. Had he been questioning like the lady, he would have followed her first inquiry by one asking who was to gain by Elbert Bennington's death. But this did not occur to her.

"I will endeavor to find such a person," he finally said, as a step sounded in the hall.

"Do so, and my best wishes will go with you. There is more than one sad phase to this case"

—she was thinking of the squatter's daughter—"but I hope to live to see the murderer of Elbert Bennington on the scaffold!"

The man named Smith looked at the door. Hugh Bennington had entered there, but, catching Augusta's last words, he stood still and looked at her while Smith looked at him. The new-comer's dark face seemed moved by some strong emotion. Certainly, it was less composed than usual, and a tremor moved his lips. He put his hand to his left breast, too, in a way which was strange; but gradually his gaze wandered from the girl to Smith, drawn perhaps by a power he could not resist.

A flush crossed his face; then with a sudden start he moved forward.

"You were talking of Elbert?"

His voice was perfectly calm, but lower than usual.

Smith's gaze flashed to Miss Warburton; he hoped she would not repeat her dream to other ears.

"Yes; and of the vain search," said she. "It seems strange that a man thus surrounded cannot be captured."

"Copperhead Swamp is worse than the labyrinth threaded by Theseus, in old time, and Hadshaw has won the game thus far. But, Augusta, do you suppose it will continue? No! He shall be captured, if I level every tree of the accursed place, and drain away every drop of water."

He did not speak boastfully, nor with any great emphasis, but there was calm determination in all he said.

"Isn't there any one who knows the interior of the place?"

"There is one man; a negro called Butcher; once a slave of my family, but for long years allowed to go at his will, who knows every foot of it. Unluckily, however, he seldom appears outside the swamp and we may not see him before we see Hadshaw."

"Is he a friend of the squatter?" Smith asked.

"Not that I am aware of. On the contrary, it is said Hadshaw cordially hates all negroes."

"Is this Butcher a man to shelter evil-doers?"

"No. He is a very conscientious man, I am told; though he had a weakness for Leopard Luke, the horse-thief, when he roamed the country, and more than once sheltered him. Strangely enough, my father, too, had a fancy for this Luke, and though he had suffered through his irregularities, was instrumental in getting him pardoned."

The entrance of a fourth party interrupted the conversation at this point, but Smith had gained a little more light. He had not forgotten his encounter with Leopard Luke at Hadshaw's cabin, nor his conviction that Luke and the squatter were somewhere together. Now came the information that Butcher, a resident of the swamp, was Luke's friend. There might be nothing in all this, but Smith decided that the chances were Butcher would not willingly guide any one to the depths of the swamp.

Alone in his room, a little later, the detective

reviewed the case. He gave but a passing thought of Miss Wasburton's dream. She was a sensible woman, but it was natural she should be impressed by a dream at that time. Her dream was like all others—the shadow and burlesque of fact.

"But what of Mr. Hugh Bennington? Here I have an interesting study. I don't exactly understand him. When the murder was committed, he was not in the midst of the guests. He says he was in his room, but it was a strange place to be at such a time. When the murder was announced, he showed no particular emotion but remained cool and gave sensible orders systematically. Since then, he has not been seen to shed a tear above his brother's face. Why did he flush so strangely, and look so strangely, when the widowed bride said she hoped to some day see the murderer on the gallows? Here is an enigma, but Hugh is all of that. Plainly, he loves Augusta Warburton. Of course, he loved her before his brother died. This death was lucky, in a worldly sense, for Hugh. He became master of Bennington Hall and had a rival removed by the knife which struck Elbert the fatal blow. Who thrust that knife home? Some people, having observed as much as I have done, would suspect that Hugh, coming upon his brother where Hadshaw left him senseless after a beating, had yielded to temptation and sent him off life's field forever. Some people, I repeat, would suspect this. As for me, I'll wait and watch."

And the detective extinguished his light and retired.

The following morning he went for a walk. He had no definite object when he started, but at the end of an hour he found himself near Burt Hadshaw's cabin. The scene had not changed. There was no sign of life except in the smoke curling up from the chimney, but Smith knew some of Sheriff Goodrod's men were lurking near, watching to seize the squatter if he tried to return home.

The detective was looking absently at the humble building when a footfall caused him to wheel abruptly. He had thought of Leopard Luke, but the horse-thief was not visible.

Instead, a woman, young and beautiful, stood before him. He recognized Relva Hadshaw, and as he saw that she was embarrassed, he removed his hat with unostentatious politeness.

"This is Mr. Smith, the detective, I think," she said, hesitatingly.

"Yes, Miss Hadshaw," he kindly answered.

"I have wanted to see you," she continued, her fingers working nervously together.

"Then I am glad I am here. Furthermore, I have no engagement, and you can say what you wish."

She was gaining strength every time he spoke, for his voice was kind, gentle and reassuring, and her manner became far calmer.

"I am aware that you are working on the— the recent tragedy here, and since you called me by name I see that I need not explain that I have an interest in it."

"Certainly not, Miss Hadshaw; I understand."

"Well, sir," her voice trembled again; "have you irrevocably decided that my father is guilty?"

"It is not for me to decide. I do my work in the case, and at the trial."

She interrupted him with a gesture.

"I beg that you will not answer in general terms. It is your own opinion I want. Tell me, do you think him guilty?"

The gentleman named Smith was visibly embarrassed.

"Pardon me, Miss Hadshaw, but you can hardly expect a direct answer to this question. For me to give a fixed opinion is to antagonize those who differ from me in their own belief. I will say, however, that I shall try not to let anything prevent me from doing justice to all. I bear Burton Hadshaw no ill will, Miss Relva."

It was a manly assertion, but Smith was frank enough to acknowledge, to himself, that it would never have been uttered had Relva been less pretty. He was an honorable man, but his calling had made him cautious. Beauty, however, is very effective on the masculine iceberg, denials to the contrary, notwithstanding.

Relva felt the words and the tone and a grateful light appeared in her eyes.

"I wish they could all say that, but Sheriff Goodrod is like a bloodhound on the trail."

"Goodrod is an honest man, but the intelligence of a mule would put out his light forever," Smith remarked.

"He is wrong in this case; he is wrong!" cried the girl. "My father is an innocent man!"

"Can you prove it?"

"Alas! no. But I know his heart, and I have heard him assert his innocence. I know he is not guilty."

It was a woman's argument, but the man named Smith felt that he would like Relva for his own counsel.

"Time may prove this," he said, in reply.

"I wanted to speak with you, Mr. Smith; to say one word in behalf of my father. They are all against him; all very hard and bitter except you. I feared you would be the same, but

I was resolved to see you. Now, I am very glad I did. Sir, it may be strange and out of place, but I want to ask that while you work on this case you will remember that not even the smallest misdemeanor was ever before charged against Burton Hadshaw, and that here, in this cabin, his wife and daughter wait and pray that the law may not err and ruin their lives!"

There was energy and impassioned eloquence in her manner; there were tears in her eyes and though his own gaze was averted, she saw that his face was gentle. Her hand lay unresistingly in his, and though his composed face did not betray his thoughts, he must have been of ice to feel no thrill creeping along his veins.

When his gaze came back to her face it was as kindly gentle as that of a father.

"Miss Hadshaw," he said, "I will not forget what you have said. I am a servant of the law, and I try to be a faithful one. I, however, am a man, and I would not willingly see yonder cabin more a house of mourning than it is at present. In this case, Miss Hadshaw, my eyes shall be as quick to detect points in favor of your father as against him."

CHAPTER XIII.

A SHOT FROM THE BUSHES.

RELVA'S face flushed with pleasure. Living as she had in her humble swamp home, St. Louis and everything connected with it had seemed so vast, important and grand, that this humble detective, who had a calm disdain for the society to which she supposed he belonged, appeared to her like a being superior by far to her acquaintances—even to the Benningtons—and correspondingly powerful.

"May Heaven bless you!" she said, brokenly. "May you be as happy as you have made me."

"I would rather have my fellow-beings believe me just than any other reward, Miss Hadshaw. Your friendship, in this case, is enough for me. But enough of this. You know, of course, that your father lives?"

"Yes; we have—"

Relva paused in sudden confusion.

"You have not seen him?"

"No, sir."

"But he has sent you tidings of his safety?"

It was an assertion, rather than a question, and the girl did not know how to reply.

"In brief, one Leopard Luke brought you news," Smith carelessly continued. "I will not ask you to comment on this point, but if you can tell me anything calculated to establish Mr. Hadshaw's innocence I will use it to his advantage."

"I only know that he asserts his innocence and that I believe him. It is a wretched affair. Hugh Bennington thinks him guilty?"

"Yes. May I rely on your silence if I suggest that Hugh had better be kept in ignorance of every point in the case?"

"I shall not tell him a word," she declared.

"And no one must know what has passed between us. It might damage your father's cause a good deal."

"No one except my mother shall know of it."

"Not even Leopard Luke?"

"Not even he."

Relva spoke with emphasis, and a pleased expression crossed Smith's face. Oddly enough, it was not caused by what she said, but by the way in which she said it.

"Pardon me, sir," she continued, "but why do you think Leopard Luke brought us news?"

"I saw him leave your cabin, and afterward talked with him in the woods."

"Are you friends?"

"Heaven forbid! No; I can't say that I like the gentleman any too well."

Mr. Smith, of St. Louis, would not have felt any kinder toward the horse-thief had he known that, a dozen rods away, a dark form crouched in the bushes and watched this interview with a scowling face. He would not have liked the sullen gleam in the blue eyes, the curling of the thin lips, or the restless playing of the tapering fingers with a revolver.

A man in ambush is always worthy of suspicion, and this particular man had murder in his heart.

"So the sneaking St. Louis spy is a lover of the fair Relva! Sdeath! she has any quantity of them. The other day she was weeping out her eyes for Bennington; now, Mr. Sneak fondles her hand and whispers nonsense in her ears. I'll see Mr. Sneak, anon!"

"He is wild and reckless, I admit," said Relva, continuing the conversation about Leopard Luke.

"Such men as he are the curse of Missouri," said Smith, gravely. "Crime should always be punished, but there is a disposition among too many of our people to make heroes of dashing criminals. But I will not detain you longer. I will go on with my work as we have said, always remembering your request. May I come here to report to you?"

"I shall be glad to see you, sir," the girl frankly replied. "Once, I looked upon you as my declared enemy, since you were engaged in the case, but I brought myself to the point

of speaking to you and I am very glad I did. When you come again, you must see my mother."

"I shall be pleased to meet her. Assure her that while I am an officer of law, I am not an instrument of injustice."

They separated there, and Smith watched the girl as she returned to the cabin. Her shapely form and graceful movements were in keeping with her face, and it is folly to suppose he did not wonder and admire. But very gentle and very grave was the face of the detective; and he sighed a little as he turned and walked back through the wood.

Chance directed his steps near the man in ambush, and a wicked smile crossed the latter's face. He cocked his revolver and crouched lower, his blue eyes full of hatred.

"Now, then, for the last act in the drama, Mr. Sneak!" he muttered.

Smith came nearer, unconscious of the danger he was daring, until he was abreast the thicket. Then, without any previous warning, a dull click sounded at his right.

It was a sound many people would have disregarded, but with a single quick bound the detective shot through the bushes. He struck on his feet, stooped and then emerged from cover, holding in his grasp a man who twisted and squirmed in a mad attempt to do him mischief. Iron muscles Smith surely had, for all this struggling of a strong man was in vain and the ambusher finally settled sullenly on the ground.

"That is right, Leopard Luke," the man named Smith calmly said. "Come down from gymnastics to common-sense."

"Curse you! I'll have your life!" hissed the ambusher.

"Not until you get a new revolver."

Smith picked up the weapon, which had missed fire, and tossed it in an adjacent pool of water.

"My gentlemanly assassin," he coolly resumed, "you will get your neck into a noose some day, if you don't amend your ways. Justice, though slow, is often uncomfortably sure."

"Never mind me," said Luke sullenly, as he shook his disordered clothing into place. "I want to speak of something else."

"Name it!"

"Her!"

The horse-thief stretched out his hand toward Hadshaw's cabin and a flush crept into his cheeks.

"Meaning Miss Hadshaw, I dare say. Well?"

"I've been watching the two of you," Luke continued, a steel-like ray of light playing through his eyes, "and I understand the situation. Let me caution you to let Relva alone."

"Well?"

"Oh! you needn't put on airs, Mr. Sneak; I know you. You think that as Burt is under a cloud you can prance around that cabin all you see fit. You will smile, and smile, and act the lover, and, maybe, get evidence to hang the squatter. At any rate, you can amuse yourself by trifling with a girl who is too innocent to read you as you are—if let alone!"

"Well?"

"It's not well, Sneak, and I'll prove it. Relva is too good for you to look at, much less know; and if her father is being hounded to death by you and your gang, she is not defenseless. No!"

Luke shook his fist at his companion, but Mr. Smith of St. Louis had never been calmer. His grave, square face was as composed as the trunk of the giant tree beside them.

"Well?"

"Well?" mimicked Luke. "Well? well?"

"Even my rival says it is well."

"Your rival?"

"I am the friend of Miss Hadshaw. You aspire to be the same; we are rivals."

Leopard Luke was bursting with rage and hatred, but he could make no headway against such easy calmness. He longed to leap at his "rival" and strangle him, but he had tested his powerful arms and was duly cautious.

He burst out with a string of abusive names, indiscriminately applied, but Smith showed no emotion whatever.

"Another man trifled with her as you are now doing," said Luke after a pause, and smiling darkly, "and the Bennington burial-ground will to-night have an extra mound. There's an open grave there now, and when the headstone goes up it will be a warning to all who would meddle with honorable girls."

"You are talking theoretical wisdom and practical nonsense," Smith replied. "We will not discuss the Bennington case, as that is useless. Have you anything more to say?"

"Yes Mr. Sneak. I want to tell you that if you don't keep away from Relva Hadshaw, I'll kill you like the dog you are."

"Well?"

Luke was speechless from wrath. In what way could he touch this man of marble? Indifferent to threats, calm as ice itself and brave and strong, he did not present any observable vulnerable point.

"One word to you, sir," said the detective, after a pause. "It behooves you to go slow. You have a bad record already, and when next you get into trouble you can't get out on the Bennington influence. The elder man is

dead, and his son, Hugh, is no friend of yours. Be economical of threats and crimes, or some day your sins will find you out. Have you anything more to say?"

The horse-thief looked greedily at the pool which held his revolver, but it was for the time at least, beyond his reach.

"We'll part now," he finally replied, with the surly swagger of a baffled rascal, "but some day we'll meet again. While you're nosing around here I'll have my eye on you, Mr. Sneak."

"Is it as dangerous as your revolver?"

The placid question stung Luke more than his own mean words had impressed Smith.

"Curse it! why do I bandy words with you?" he muttered. "It's a waste of breath when we know each other so well. We are rivals; you said it yourself. We're both in love with Relva Hadshaw, and men mean business in such cases. Between you and me, it's a matter of life and death. We'll have it out some day."

At the last word he moved off, surly as ever. It was a new mood for him, who usually laughed at good and bad fortune alike, but there was something about the man named Smith which overthrew all his calmness. But a measureless bulk of deadly hatred was in his heart, and some day, as he had said, death might come to one of them at the hands of the other.

Smith knew all this, yet he watched the horse-thief out of sight without any change on his face. This done, he went his way. But his mind soon left Leopard Luke, even while long custom made him keep constantly on the alert for danger.

His thoughts were on Relva Hadshaw and Luke's last words. The man had declared that they were both in love with the same girl. Love! Mr. Smith, of St. Louis, had thought the passion a stranger to him. Schooled in the hard lines of his profession he had seen so many flaws in what seemed at first sight perfect diamonds that he had grown indifferent to women.

In love! Smith did not smile at the idea; neither did he admit it; neither did he ask himself if it was true. Perhaps he preferred to look well before he leaped.

But ever to his mind came the recollection of the squatter's daughter. Poor and lowly she was in life's scale, but beauty, grace and intelligence made a dowry not to be despised.

The future bade fair to make them better acquainted. Their interview of the day tended that way and he was not disposed to avoid the acquaintance.

He went back to Bennington Hall.

That day, as Luke had indicated, an empty grave in the Bennington lot was filled; another mound was raised; Elbert Bennington slept with his fathers.

But was his sleep peaceful? Did he, from a new sphere, forgive his assassin, or was he, as the dream of Augusta Warburton might show, anxious to return to earth and explain a crime which was dark, unnatural and unavenged?

CHAPTER XIV.

THE KING OF THE ROAD.

"STEADY, all! Get to your saddles!"

An autumn evening and a browning wood; a score of men in camp, springing up at a decisive command and gaining their saddles swiftly, but silently.

The leader, stationed at the head, looks at his followers and nods approvingly. He is a tawny-haired young man, with blue eyes and a recklessly-jolly face. He sits like a Centaur on a horse which is black, with now and then a white spot the size of an orange; a clean-limbed, bright-eyed horse which gives promise of great speed and is certainly handsome enough for a queen.

This is Leopard Luke and his steed. And behind them sit a score of other riders, young, reckless scamps, graduates of prison and crime; but just the sort of band to follow Leopard Luke in his lawless trade.

For the old terror of the road is about to begin his career anew. With another spotted horse beneath him, and a band to follow his lead, he hopes to make the State ring, and the press bristle, with notes on the King of Horse-Thieves.

Bravely he lays his plans, heedless of the warning of Mr. Smith, who had reminded him that Jay Bennington no longer lived. He is about to make his first move in the new campaign.

"Now, then, boys, here we go. Not too much noise, you know; avoid loud talk, and don't let your weapons jingle. Fetlock Phil, ride beside me."

The man addressed, who was the second of the band in rank, obeyed the direction.

"Did you see the old donkey at the trees?"

"Yes, sir!"

"And what did he say?"

"Well, the message you probably wanted was, 'All quiet at the Nest.'"

"Exactly. But the old fellow said more—what?"

"Well, he tried to pump me."

"Concerning what?"

"Yourself and myself, our plans and intentions. In fact, I was subjected to a cross examination such as my—such as I've seen lawyers give witnesses."

Luke did not fail to notice the break, but his mind was chiefly on Butcher, for it was of him they spoke.

"I'll teach the old idiot a lesson when I see him again."

"He sent a message of his own, as he called it."

"Hal! what was it?"

"Something like this: 'Tell Massa Luke dat ef he has it in him heart ter do anyting ag'in' de law, for de good Heaben's sake to think twict!'"

Luke laughed recklessly.

"A well-meaning old codger. Perhaps there are those who would say the same to you."

He looked closely at Fetlock Phil.

The latter changed color, but defiantly answered:

"Let them say it if they will. Ain't I old enough to be my own master?"

He asked the question with the swagger of nineteen years and its peculiar wisdom, and Luke hastened to assure him he was as capable as any one.

But Fetlock Phil was something of a mystery to his leader. Brave, intelligent and shrewd, he had seemed just the man for a lieutenant, but he had never become confidential. While other men boasted of their wild deeds, Fetlock Phil held his peace. Where he was born, what his real name was, and what had been his life before he joined the band, none of them knew; but one unguarded remark had given Luke a clue, unless he erred.

The father, or brother, or some other relative of Fetlock Phil was a lawyer.

The band rode on with due care. That night they hoped to relieve the residents of the county of enough horses to start a fund for Leopard Luke's band, and as the latter were making their first raid it behooved them to make a success.

Two weeks had passed since the events of our last chapter, and Luke had been busy in getting together his band. Butcher, suspecting what business kept him so much away from the Swamp, had lifted his humble voice to caution him, but his warnings had fallen on deaf ears. Hadshaw still remained with the negro, and all Sheriff Goodrod's efforts to find him had been unavailing.

The horse-thieves had left the field, and riding three abreast in the road, were on their way to a place marked for their first blow. Suddenly Leopard Luke, who was in advance, reined in his horse, and the band came to a halt.

"Wheels!" he said, briefly. "Get to cover; if the game is worth it, we'll have the horse; otherwise, lie low!"

On came the unseen carriage. Luke's experienced ears had made out that two horses were attached, and he awaited their coming with impatience.

Then from the darker shadows rolled the team—a covered carriage with two horses attached. Even in the dim light it was plain they were fine animals; the outfit of some wealthy family; and Luke passed the word to his men.

From bush and tree sprang the wild desperadoes, and the challenge of the leader rung out clearly:

"Halt! Hands up! Don't stir a foot, or we'll riddle you with lead!"

The colored driver was a man who preferred personal safety to anything else, and he promptly obeyed. Hands enough were on his horses to bring them to a halt, despite their frightened leaping, and the negro had only to point his own fingers up at the dim sky.

A brief pause followed, and then the carriage window was thrown up, and a head appeared.

"What's the matter here?" a sturdy voice demanded.

"The matter is that it's shell out or close up," enigmatically answered Luke. "We're the Kings of the Road, and we're after plunder. Keep steady, you, and no one shall be harmed; resist, and—well, you see we have the odds in our favor."

"What do you want?" again demanded the man in the carriage.

Leopard Luke started. That time he had recognized him, and the knowledge that he was trying to rob Hugh Bennington momentarily abashed him. In forming his new band he had remembered what he owed Jay Bennington, and resolved to spare his son, but fate had willed that his first blow should be struck at him.

"All we want is your horses," he managed to reply, after a pause. "We're making a collection, and yours will fit in well. Now, remember; make no resistance, and all will go well; act ugly, and I won't answer for the consequences. Boys, cut loose the horses!"

"Wait one moment," said Hugh, still keeping in the carriage. "I believe I know you. Is this Leopard Luke?"

"I am Leopard Luke, King of the Road!" pompously answered the horse-thief.

"Have you forgotten what my father did for you? Is this the way you repay the debt?"

"This is my way," was the cool reply. "Jay Bennington can't be useful to me any longer in the old way, so I'll try to make the family work in to my good in a new style. Boys, cut loose the horses!"

Just as the order was given, Luke was surprised to see a man swing himself lightly to the box beside the driver, catch both reins and whip from his hands, and then the latter came down with cutting force on the spirited horses.

Leopard Luke stood dumfounded. Despite the darkness he recognized this man; it was Smith, of St. Louis.

At the same time the latter struck he gave utterance to a terrible yell, and under the double spur the horses gave a tremendous, simultaneous bound, and the men at their heads were pitched aside like ten-pins.

One great bound gave the horses their freedom, but the whip went up and down again on their sides, and as they went the man at the reins turned his head and spoke:

"Leopard Luke, remember that Jay Bennington is not now alive!"

And then the carriage whirled away, the man named Smith handling the horses like a professional. In a race the chances might have been against them, but Luke lacked the presence of mind to order pursuit. He had been so dumfounded by the appearance and prompt action of the detective—his rival—that he had no presence of mind, and the words floated back to him were not reassuring.

Away went the carriage at its mad pace, but Mr. Smith held his peace until a mile had been traversed. Then giving the reins back to the negro, he quietly changed his position to the interior of the vehicle.

"My dear sir," said Hugh, "let me congratulate you. It was splendidly done."

"These fellows are blunderers," Smith evenly replied. "Had they been sharp, they would have watched both sides of the carriage. I saw where they were lame, and that is why I asked you to parley with our desperado while I got to the box."

"You should be a soldier, Mr. Smith. Nerve and foresight like yours are unusual."

"Let me add my mite," said a feminine voice—the voice of Miss Warburton. "I shivered, in spite of myself, in the presence of those men, but I felt like cheering when you conquered them so handsomely. You are a true son of Missouri, Mr. Smith."

The detective thanked her for her compliment, and he had wisdom enough to see that it was genuine. He had become invulnerable to compliments, as a rule, but from Miss Warburton it was not a trifling matter.

He occupied the front seat of the carriage and was thus brought facing his companions. They sat side by side, and Hugh paid the lady all the attention she could require. It was his duty, considering what she had been to Elbert Bennington. But, despite the darkness, Smith noticed that Hugh's left arm lay across the back of the seat and touching Miss Warburton's waist. Smith noticed this, we repeat, but, perhaps, it was only Hugh's duty, considering what she had been to Elbert Bennington.

The position of the man named Smith had been rather pleasant at the ball during the time he had been there. A better host than Hugh he had never seen, and Miss Warburton was not one to thrust her sorrow into the eyes of other people like a nightmare. She grieved for Elbert sincerely, but Hugh was as tender as a brother.

Miss Warburton had once spoken of returning to her home, but Mrs. Bennington, who had begun to recuperate perceptibly, at once became worse at the announcement and the younger lady's stay was indefinitely extended.

CHAPTER XV.

A STRUGGLING SECRET.

THE carriage reeled on at a goodly rate of speed. The negro driver had been a badly-frightened man when the horse-thieves dropped upon him, and he had no desire to be overtaken.

The night, which had promised to be clear, began to change in its character. Clouds swept across the sky, the darkness increased, thunder rolled distantly, and vivid electric flashes ran along the dull-black billows of cloud.

"Quite a prospect of rain," said Mr. Smith, indolently.

Hugh started.

"I have been wondering why we were called out to-night," he said. "The woman by whom I am summoned has not taken the trouble to see me for some years; in fact, I had almost forgotten her."

"She was once a dependent of your family, I believe you said," Smith replied.

"Yes. My first recollection of her—her name is Rebecca Gardner—is of seeing a little cabin off toward Copperhead Swamp, where she lived alone. She was a strange woman anyway. She did no work and was supported by my father, but I have heard her sneer at the band which fed her. Again, her manner toward me was strange. At times she was very

gushing and affectionate; at others she would snap and snarl at me like a wild beast. I was only a child, but I supposed then, and still keep the idea, that she was deranged mentally. When I was a dozen years old she left our plantation and I have never seen her since. Now comes this message, 'I am dying; come to see me as you hope for mercy!' A strange message that."

Smith thought so, too, but he gathered an idea from it. This idea he kept to himself, however, and indifferently replied:

"Another insane freak, I suppose."

"Such was my own idea, at first, but I begin to feel more serious. Ah! rain at last; if I had anticipated this I would not have invited you to accompany me."

There was a dash of wind and rain, a heavier peal of thunder and the shower was indeed upon them. With this music they rode on, but the carriage was close and the remaining distance short and they ultimately drew up beside a small cabin.

It was on the plantation of an old-time friend of Jay Bennington, and there Rebecca Gardner had lived for ten years.

The travelers were soon inside, the carriage whirled away to the stable, and Hugh saw the woman who had summoned him.

The room was not large, although it comprised the whole interior of the cabin. In one corner sat a bed, upon which lay the sick woman. Her sole attendant was a muscular negress.

Rebecca Gardner was probably sixty years of age, and Time had dealt none too gently with her. She was thin and shrunken of face and form, her complexion was almost as yellow as that of the negress, her chin and nose nearly met over a toothless mouth and her eyes were shrunken far back under her bushy brows.

But the eyes were not dim. They had never been dim, and on this night the light of fever and something more had kindled unnatural fires in their depths. It was a bright, keen and shrewd face, despite her age, but, unless signs were deceptive, the stamp of death was on it that night.

"Ha!" cried this woman, directing her attention to them, and an unpleasant notice it was:

"Who thundering comes on blackest steed, With slacken'd bit, and hoof of speed?"

It was a question none of them felt able to answer, unless they took the inquiry as figurative, but Hugh advanced to her side.

"It is I, Rebecca," he kindly said. "I have come as you requested. I am Hugh Bennington."

The name stopped an impatient retort which trembled on the withered lips, and one of the withered hands went to the withered brow.

"Bennington! Bennington! I've heard the name, but where! Who in the fiend's name are you?"

"I am Jay Bennington's son."

"Ha! now I seem to see. A cold hearth and a ruined home; a gay cavalier and a broken heart."

Hugh looked helplessly at the negress, who gently touched her forehead.

"Miss 'Becca ain't right hyar, sah. De fever hab got in an' de wit hab slipped out. I's afraid you can't make her understand nuffin, sah."

"What are you muttering about?" the old woman sharply demanded. "Go, cut off your heads!"

This unreasonable order was not obeyed, and a brief silence followed. Smith and Miss Warburton retired to the further side of the room, and made a pretense of watching the storm from the little window, but they could not avoid hearing all that was said.

"Why don't you talk?" suddenly demanded Rebecca. "I won't have soft-tongued people about me; give me those who speak out, and there'll be no plotting. Hark ye, I'll have none of it!"

Hugh advanced and took her hand. She made a movement to withdraw it, but her eyes met his, and he exerted every atom of strength to hold them. He was successful. The power went out of her hands, and the wildness faded somewhat from her eyes.

"Rebecca," he said, steadily, "my name is Hugh Bennington. You remember Jay's son, don't you? What have you to tell me? You sent for me, you know."

"Yes," she answered, readily, "I did. I have something to tell you; have a secret to unfold which I can't take to my grave. I have tried, because I took Jay Bennington's money, and swore to be forever silent; but, lying here on my death-bed, my resolution wavered. Her blood, too, cried aloud for vengeance, and I dared not pass the portal of the gates with my story untold."

She spoke calmly, but her words were so strange that it was impossible to say whether they were to the point or not.

"What have you to tell?" Hugh gently asked.

She unclosed her lips, hesitated, put her hand to her forehead, and then looked blank.

"True," she finally muttered, "what is it? I had it here, but now I can't remember what it is. What was it about?"

"Your promise to my father."

"Your father?"

"To Jay Bennington."

"Ah! I remember. Yes; I did promise him that—that—What did I promise him? It's here," touching her forehead, "here; and it's beating like a captive bird beats its cage with its wings. Beat! beat! beat!—it wants to get out. Do you hear it?"

"Yes," said Hugh, with great patience.

"Now, let it out. You promised Jay Bennington something. What was it?"

"Why, don't you know your wealth was won by a crime?"

It was a singular question, and for the first time in our acquaintance with Mr. Smith, of St. Louis, he was guilty of an unprofessional start. He turned his head and looked steadily at Hugh, indifferent to what Miss Warburton might think.

But Hugh had never been more composed.

"You were speaking of something you wished to tell," he evenly said. "Tell me quickly, before you lose it."

"It won't be lost, for it can't get out. I wish it could. It keeps thumping away here," touching her forehead again, "like a blacksmith hammering iron. What was I going to say? Was it to you I was to tell it?"

Hugh leaned back in his chair and looked at the negress.

"This is a waste of time," he said. "The fever is in the woman's head, as you said, and her wits are out. Probably what she had to say was of no consequence."

"I took his money and promised to keep the secret," said Rebecca, absently. "Little good his money has done me, for there has ever been a devil in my mind to tell me I was the chief of sinners. What business had Jay Bennington to make me a partner in his crime?"

Hugh glanced uneasily at Smith and Augusta. Both were again looking from the window, watching the lightning leap along the black clouds and pale to nothing as it went.

And the thunder boomed overhead, and the wind wailed around the cabin. It was the dirge of Rebecca Gardner's career.

"This is all rubbish, woman," said Hugh, almost harshly.

"Rubbish? 'Twould be little of that if the wronged was righted. Ah! I've served the devil long enough; I'll tell the truth now. I'm near my end and I'll not go with the secret untold. It's here, here; I'll tell it. Why can't it get out? It beats and thumps, but it's imprisoned there."

She worked her bony fingers constantly over her forehead, but Hugh leaned back again in his chair. He looked angry and disgusted, and for several minutes sat in silence, while the negress tried to get Rebecca in condition again. It was clear to the nurse that, though she seemed stronger than she had done for several days, it was a fictitious strength which kept her up and that she would soon wear herself out. Unless her statement was soon made it would never be made.

Matters were on this footing, when on the air the clear, penetrating note of a bugle was followed by the tramp of many horses' feet and a shower of pebbles shot spitefully against the door. Hugh sprang up and Smith wheeled at the same moment; both had the same idea of the cause of these sounds.

Before they could move further, however, the door of the cabin was flung open and a man entered, accompanied by a gust of wind and rain. He stood before them, himself wet and dripping, but in spite of all, the reckless, daredevil look was on his face—for this was Leopard Luke.

"I thought you were here!" he cried, with a wild laugh, as he saw Hugh. "Fine place for a Bennington to herd. But I came to see some one else, and here's at him!"

At the last word his roving glance became fixed on Smith and his right hand went up quickly. A revolver gleamed in the dull light; a weapon not only dry, but new, and not likely to miss like that other he had tried on the detective.

"Good-by, Mr. Sneak!" he exclaimed.

But even as his finger was on the trigger the weapon was struck up and the grasp of Hugh's strong hand was on his arm; a grasp almost equal to that of Smith, of St. Louis.

"Stop, madman!" cried Hugh. "Would you add murder to—"

He stopped as the horse-thief deftly changed the revolver from one hand to the other and tried to send the lead through his assailant's breast. There was no danger, and Hugh's smile was quite natural, for he knew his power; but the struggle was strangely interrupted.

Rebecca Gardner had seen all, and when Hugh was thus put in jeopardy the strength of youth seemed to spring back to the old woman's limbs. From her bed she sprung with a single leap, and while all looked in amazement she extended both arms toward Leopard Luke.

"No, no, no!" she cried, wildly. "Hold your hand if you would not be eternally doomed. Your arm will shrivel in the hour you shed Bennington blood. Down on your knees—"

The aged woman paused, threw up her hands,

staggered and would have fallen on the floor had not the negress caught her. The latter knelt down and Rebecca lay partly in her arms and partly on the floor; but it was plain her career on earth was over. With her last great effort Nature had burst aside the anchor of life.

She lay almost motionless, her eyes closed, her breathing heavy and rumbling.

So far as the others were concerned there had been a tableau, but Leopard Luke aroused. With a wild laugh, which was plainly forced, he darted through the door and was gone. There was a moment's pause, the bugle sounded again, followed by a tramping of feet and the horse-thieves sped away into the darkness.

If any one thought of following they stopped when Rebecca opened her eyes. She tried to rise, failed, looked anxiously, beseechingly around, and her gaze fell on Hugh's face.

"The—the paper—is—"

Four times she gasped, and each time spoke a word, but at the last her head fell back and Death walked through the door.

CHAPTER XVI.

SMITH FINDS SOMETHING OF INTEREST.

REBECCA GARDNER was dead, and she had died with her secret, whatever it was, untold. Hugh aided the negress to care for her somewhat and had not noticed that Smith had gone out until he returned and announced that Leopard Luke had triumphed after all; their horses had been stolen and their colored driver left wounded and senseless.

The angry light which flashed to Hugh's eyes faded away as he looked at Augusta and he quietly said they must borrow.

"I don't believe Mr. Charingway will loan. Every hoof and saddle is gone from the stable. The King of Horse-Thieves has swept things up in his olden style."

It was even so, for not a horse remained on the plantation. Whether Leopard Luke had followed our friends after his first repulse is uncertain, but there was no room to doubt but that he came in ahead at the end.

The trio stayed with Mr. Charingway's family that night, and in the morning other horses were sent from the Hall and they returned home. It was by that time generally known that the horse-thieves had made a wide sweep and with good success, and if Luke read the papers that day his vanity was tickled a good deal by seeing what the scribes said about him.

Rebecca was left with Mr. Charingway's people, and it was likely no white person would be present when she was buried. It was known that Jay Bennington had provided for her generously, but she had not been a woman to win hearts.

If Hugh remembered anything about her death scene, he kept his own counsel. Smith, of St. Louis, remembered and wondered. There was a good deal about it to cause wonder. What mystery of the past had troubled her last hours?

"I took his money and promised to keep his secret. What business had Jay Bennington to make me a partner in his crime?" she had asked.

Nothing she had said, however, gave any clew to the mystery, and Smith began to think it was very likely a trivial affair. This did not prevent him from looking into the matter, however.

Among the acquaintances he had made on the plantation was an old colored man who had taken a fancy to him. He wandered around to see this man that day, and had set himself to work to talk of many things before touching the one nearest his thoughts when the negro broke the ice for him.

"I hear dat Miss 'Becca Gardner am gone de ole road," he said.

"Yes, she is certainly gone."

"Golly! she was a quar' one."

"Queer in what way?"

"Most ebery way. I knowed her when she was a gal. She was a poor white's darter, an' ez wild, reckless and hot-tempered as she was pritty. She had a sister who died young. But Miss 'Becca lived. Dar was romances in her life, dey say, but she turned into a nold maid at de last an' was as cranky, crabbed, an' quar' as a crooked stick o' wood."

"How did Jay Bennington happen to pension her off?"

"Well, sah, he was thick wid her an' Miss Harriet when dey was all young, an' I s'pect he felt sort o' hooman fur her, sah."

"What do you mean by 'thick'?"

"Simply dat he used ter go ter see dem on de sly in de ole days."

"To flirt with those he thought not good enough for him to see openly."

The negro meditated for some time.

"Whv, no, sah, I nebber looked at it in dat light. Reckon 'twan't no flirtation; only ter hab a good time. An' dem gals was jess as upright an' squar' ez though dey was queens, was 'Becca an' Harriet."

"The latter died young, you say?"

"'Bout twenty, sah."

"Of what trouble?"

"Heart disease, dey called it."
 "Called it? What's your opinion?"
 "Wal, sah, I'll whisper ter you in privacy, sah, dat I's always had a s'picion, sah."

The announcement was made confidentially and with the garrulity of old age.

"In other words, you had your eyes open."
 "Yes, sah; yes, sah; dat was de identicle fact, sah. Well, bein' as I did hab 'em open I thought it kinder quar' dat Jake Rockheart, Miss 'Becca's lover, should disappear right at de same time an' never show up ag'in, sah."

"Was it a mysterious disappearance?"
 "Miss 'Becca said no, an' s'plained dat he had gone to New Orleans ter ship in a sailin' craft, but dough nigh thirty years has passed Jake Rockheart has nebber come back."

"Well, but what's your theory?"
 "Sah, ef I didn't b'lieve Jake ter be dead I would nebber breathe it, but I s'pect he could tell how Miss Harriet died."

"If he put her out of the way, he had a motive in it."
 "Yes, sah."

A brief silence followed, during which Smith thought of the assertion of the dying woman that Jay Bennington had paid her money to keep a secret, and that by taking it she had become a "partner in his crime." Was there any connection between these two matters?

"What was his object?" he mechanically repeated.

"Dar you hab me, sah; I can't think ob none."

"Then why do you suspect him?"
 "Kase he went off as he did, sah."

Before Smith could answer a rap sounded at the door. It was an ordinary circumstance, and the negro arose and opened it. Darkness had fallen outside and he did not recognize the man in the cloak and slouched hat who stood before him, but the latter pushed inside the cabin and then seized the negro by both shoulders.

In the dim light he failed to see Smith, who sat a little at one side.

"Blow your withered-up old face, Pomp—how are you?" he blufly exclaimed. "I'd have known you anywhere. You're just like what you used to be, only Time has drawn the map of the United States on your face and laid out more Missi-sippi rivers than you need. Blow your jolly heart, how are you, old man?"

He hit Pomp a rap at the last word, which nearly knocked him over a chair and the negro fell to caressing his shoulder.

"Jess you let up on dat!" he warned, belligerently. "I ain't no nine-pin ter be knocked about, an' I'll hab you know dat ef I be seventy-five y'ar old I ain't ter be insulted by de Lord-knows-who."

The stranger laughed.
 "You'll know who when I say that my name is—Jake Rockheart!"

Profound silence reigned in the cabin. Pomp sat staring in a helpless way, while Smith, remembering the name of Miss Rebecca's early lover, sat undecided whether to act the private man and make his presence known, or the detective, and keep quiet.

"Hits you hard, my gay Pomp, don't it?" continued the new-comer, sitting down on the table. "Well, I suppose it is a surprise, for I presume Jake Rockheart has been looked upon as dead these twenty-eight years. Quite a period of absence, isn't it, Pomp? Hello!"

His roving eyes had discovered Smith, and the latter expected him, as a man who had left Missouri for his own safety, to be a little embarrassed. He never made a greater mistake.

"Your servant, sir," coolly continued Mr. Rockheart. "Pomp's friends are mine. Hope I see you well?"

"Never better," replied the detective. "As for you, your looks answer for all."

"I am a hearty buck," Rockheart admitted. "Nothing like salt water for muscle."

He rambled on for some time, when Smith suggested that, as he probably wished to talk with Pomp, he would take his leave; but the new-comer voted to the contrary, and said that if he would wait a moment he should be pleased to walk with him. Naturally, Smith did not object.

"I find that I've come back just too late to see Rebecca," continued Rockheart, addressing Pomp again. "Time cuts down the grain, don't it? Rebecca is gone, and Jay is gone."

"Miss 'Becca would hab been glad to see you, sah," said Pomp, who had recovered his breath and his tongue.

Rockheart grimaced.
 "Perhaps she would; but I don't know as I could have reciprocated. Rebecca had her charms, and she had—a most diabolical temper."

"You used ter think her all right, sah."

"Blow your U. S. map, so I did; but I changed my mind—changed it most emphatically. By the way, Pomp, I hear that Butcher is living near—just where, nobody seems to know. I was directed to you for information."

Pomp told all he knew about Butcher, and Rockheart sat on the table, swinging one leg, and watched him.

Smith surveyed Rockheart attentively. He

was a tall, muscular man, with the mark of tropical suns on his face, and his whole manner carried out the idea that he had been a sailor. Smith found it difficult to believe that he saw a murderer returned to the scene of his crime, yet there was an unpleasant expression around the man's mouth. He did not look like one whom it was advisable to "tie to."

He soon finished his business with Pomp, and suggested to Smith that they go. Passing through the door, he slipped his hand lightly inside his companion's arm.

"I want to see Butcher," he then continued; "but if he is such a mysterious recluse, how am I to do it? Perhaps you can tell."

"I know of no way except to watch for him. He comes out now and then for supplies. You know he has been a sort of pensioner of Jay Bennington."

Smith watched Rockheart, who broke into a laugh.

"Singular fact, that," he answered. "It ain't often a man lets an able-bodied slave run to seed in that way, is it? Why should Jay pay Butcher to live in the swamp, rather than put him to work on the plantation?"

"Nobody knows why."

"Don't they? I ain't so sure of that. Perhaps if the old friends of Jay were to unclothe their mouths they could surmise. Blow my buttons, it seems odd that Jay and Rebecca, and the rest, are all gone and I am here. Jake Rockheart, you're a lucky dog, a lucky dog!"

The speaker smote himself on the hip.

"People have wondered a good deal about Butcher."

"I suppose so. Hal ha!"

"But you say you know the secret!"

"No, no; I didn't say so. I spoke of what some people might surmise. What have I to do with Jay Bennington? I was a poverty-stricken dog in the old days; I am now, and always shall be—perhaps; so what should I know of Jay? Ah! he was a gay one, was Jay. But the sod covers him deeply now."

For a moment Rockheart was silent, and then with a sudden start he changed the subject and began to tell of his own life abroad. He had been a sailor and traveler, he said, and he could not be induced to talk on any other subject. The remainder of the interview was unsatisfactory, and Smith's only idea at parting was that it would be well to keep an eye on Jake Rockheart.

CHAPTER XVII.

ROCKHEART MAKES A NEW ACQUAINTANCE.

IN devoting a part of his attention to the man from the ocean, Smith did not intend to neglect the case which had brought him to the neighborhood of Copperhead Swamp. In a certain degree he was always busy on that case. Twice he had seen Relva, since that first important interview, and he had watched men and weighed words until he had his own opinion in regard to the Bennington tragedy.

Time, however, was necessary to verify the theory he had formed.

The coming of Jake Rockheart seemed almost a part of his case, for he had been concerned with the Bennington family; how nearly, Smith began to surmise on further cautious inquiry. Over a score of years had passed since Rockheart's sudden departure, but there were men who remembered him of old, and who did not hesitate to talk.

In the old days, Rebecca and Harriet Gardner had been belles in the circle in which they moved. Rockheart and Jay Bennington were frequent visitors there, and this had made the two men as intimate as their difference in worldly station would allow. But Rockheart came back with no love for old Jay, and there were some rumors that they had quarreled before the former went abroad.

Smith joined these circumstances to the fact that Rebecca had muttered when dying about having taken Jay's gold to keep a guilty secret and decided to look and listen. If Rockheart was the man Pomp had suspected, it would be no waste of time to watch him.

The man from the ocean settled at the village hotel and proceeded to look for Butcher. He saw other old acquaintances, many of them of his own color, but none of them could fill the gap in his mind wherein he wished to place Butcher. In order to see him he went often to Copperhead Swamp, but this only served to bring Sheriff Goodrod's suspicions upon him, and that good man, believed him to be a confederate of Hadshaw and a "tool of the man named Smith."

One dark evening, Rockheart found himself the only occupant of the gentlemen's room at the hotel. He felt rather lonesome and, pending some one's arrival, wandered about the room like an uneasy spirit, though his fancy for perusing the various placards was of the earthly order of things.

One of them rather interested Rockheart:

"LEOPARD LUKE!
 "A reward of \$500 will be paid by the citizens of this county for the capture of the noted horse-thief, Leopard Luke. Let no man harbor him, for his attractions are of the Lucifer order and as dangerous. Let law and order triumph. Apply to
 "B. GOODROD, Sheriff."

Rockheart read this notice twice, and even then stood staring at it. He was painfully conscious that his nearly empty pockets would be gladdened by the weight of the five hundred dollars, but he did not know where to look for Leopard Luke. Neither was it plain what "B. Goodrod, Sheriff," had to do in the matter. He was to be applied to, but for what purpose? Was it for information, to meet the horse-thief and discuss the matter, or to get a recipe for the "triumph of law and order?"

Before he had fully settled this matter a hand descended on his shoulder in a hasty, but friendly, blow.

"Fine proclamation, that, stranger," said a voice in his ear.

He wheeled and found himself face to face with a fair-haired young man who smiled amiably upon him.

But Mr. Rockheart stood like a statue, his lower jaw down, his eyes unnaturally prominent and his whole manner far from being as usual.

"Did I hit you too hard?" laughed the younger man. "Sorry, but I wanted to wake you up. What do you think of that paper? I say, what do you think of it?"

"I don't know," blandly answered Jake, a long pause between each word.

"Don't, eh? Strikes me there's a rattling chance for somebody to capture Leopard Luke. How does it impress you?"

"Splendid chance," absently agreed Rockheart.

"Go ahead and do it, then," said the young man coolly, "for I am Leopard Luke!"

So saying, he threw back his cloak, showing a belt with a profusion of weapons in it, and plainly dared his companion to take him. He was Leopard Luke, and this was another trick of his to secure notice in the newspapers.

But Rockheart remained indifferent to the main point.

"Luke who—what's your other name?" he asked.

"Leopard Luke."

"Blow your teeth, what do I care for that handle? What's your surname? Give me that, will you?"

"Oh, you go and hang yourself!" said the horse-thief, disgusted at the lack of impression. "Come and take me, earn the reward, and then ask all about me."

"Were you raised 'round here?"

The question was too much for Luke's composure. He felt himself slighted and hurt, and with a quick motion he reached out and took Mr. Rockheart's nose between his thumb and finger.

"By your leave!" he said, and then he gave the nose a most vicious wrench.

This done, he tried to leap lightly back to avoid an attack, but he had served to arouse the stranger, as he found to his cost.

Rockheart snarled like an enraged dog, and with a leap so quick that Luke could not get away, he seized him in his arms. Long arms they were, and as they wound around the horse-thief, the latter felt as though a grizzly had closed upon him. The result of his bravado too, bade fair to be disastrous, and he put forth every effort to wrest himself clear.

Vain attempt! Jake Rockheart held him easily, and then shoving him up against the wall, scowled until his black brows rolled like breakers on a rocky coast.

"Blow your eyes, you puppy-cheek! I have a good mind to chuck your teeth down your neck!" Rockheart said wrathfully. "Perhaps you want to pull my nose again?"

"I'd like the chance," Luke sullenly answered.

"Oh, you would, eh?" and the man from the ocean smiled. "But you'd be a fool to try it. Where I've drank fire-water the last score of years, we serve our insulters so!"

Mr. Rockheart drew his finger across his throat, and Leopard Luke was ready to acknowledge himself a fool.

"You say you're the man for whose capture five hundred dollars are wanted? What in blazes do I care if you are? I'm no thief-catcher. Sit down!"

He kicked a chair forward, released Luke, and himself sat down near at hand. Impressed by this generosity, Luke imitated his example.

"We'll have something to drink when the barkeeper shows up," said Rockheart, calmly. "In the mean while, who in perdition are you, anyway? Your face reminds me of another face I knew thirty years ago."

Luke wheeled quickly.

"Whose face?"

"Just what I want to know; can't place it if I go to Davy Jones's locker," said the elder man. "You see, I've been abroad eight-and-twenty years, and I've lost my grip a good bit. Your face is familiar. Maybe I knew your mother or father. Who knows? Your name you said was—"

"Leopard Luke," said the horse-thief sulkily. "That's all there is to it. Before I won the word 'Leopard,' I had only Luke to go by, or I had a score, as you see fit to call it. I was an orphan and an outcast at the beginning of my recollection. Brought up in a nigger-cabin,

people called me Luke Black. Afterward, it was Heenan, because I won a fight; Patch, because I was a jumper, and so on. Yet, I don't even know as the word Luke fits me. I'm an Ishmaelite."

"A what?"

"An Ishmaelite."

"What's that?"

"Blessed if I know," said Luke with his usual reckless laugh. "The prosecuting attorney once said I was a born Ishmaelite, and that he reckoned my hand had been against my fellow-men long enough for the good of Missouri."

"I see the point."

Silence followed, and the two looked steadily at each other. Having said so much Luke was disposed to say more, and he had a feeling that it would be safe. Rockheart, on his part, rubbed his chin meditatively and looked as though he was revolving a conundrum of importance.

But while he looked, his keen eyes scrutinized every feature of the face before him.

"You're a lad of spirit," he finally said, "and I am glad to have met you. I hope we may become better acquainted. But isn't it unsafe for you to be around here?"

Luke did not care to confess his love of notoriety to his companion, so he said he was about to go. Just then the barkeeper returned, and the two walked to the bar to taste his whisky.

Rockheart took the bottle first, but before filling his glass paused to raise it between himself and the light. And as he did so there was a click, a miniature roar and a crash, and the bottle went to pieces in his hand. Glass and whisky flew plentifully, and Rockheart's face was filled, but it was scarcely done before an ugly-looking knife gleamed in his hand and he was looking around for the man who fired the damaging shot.

The younger man, too, drew a weapon, but Rockheart moved a good deal quicker than he. It was not hard to understand that the man was an old hand at the business.

One moment he looked, and then shot toward the door with wonderful agility. A man standing there found it impossible to retreat, and only that a blind, hap-hazard stroke on his part knocked the knife away it would have found a sheath in his body.

Another moment and Rockheart had him in the middle of the floor, and on his knees, in which position the bony right hand kept him.

"Blow your too-nimble hand! you'd have shot me, would you? You'd have salted me with lead, would you? Oh! I'll have your life for that; I will, so—"

But in the midst of his threatening, and his prisoner's protestations that he had shot at nothing which he missed, there was a further tramp at the door, and Leopard Luke caught at his arm.

"Away, man! Save yourself, or it'll be a bad job!"

Luke spoke and was gone, and Rockheart, looking up, saw that other men had invaded the room—friends, beyond a doubt, of him who was under his heel. Many an affray had the man from the ocean been in in his day, but it suddenly flashed upon him that he had reformed, and that it would be a bad thing for him to get into trouble then. So far, with such a dim light, it was not likely he had been recognized; he must take care that he wasn't, or the plans which had brought him to the town would never be realized.

With one sweep he appropriated his prisoner's cloak, with a second he sent the dim light flying far away, and then there was a crash of glass, and Rockheart was gone.

They did not catch him. When they went outside they found the cloak, which he had used to muffle his head when he sprang through the window; but there was no more clew to the man than there was to the maker of the boots he wore.

Acting on the description furnished by the barkeeper, who was old and partly blind, he was advertised for as a "small man with red hair," and other equally accurate statistics, but he was never found.

Rockheart, however, had found Leopard Luke; he would not have lost him for a good deal of money; and it came to pass that he accompanied the horse-thief to a place where they could talk more safely.

And it came to pass, furthermore, that Jake heard of Butcher, and ultimately met him, but in the old negro he found a most obstinate man. Butcher knew Rockheart, and knowing no good of him, closed his lips over all secrets which he held.

CHAPTER XVIII.

A MEETING AT MIDNIGHT.

LEOPARD LUKE entered Butcher's cabin at dusk one evening, nodded to the negro and to Burt Hadshaw and sat wearily down. He had been in the saddle all day and was ready to rest, but he would not complain to the other men. Their sympathies were not with his nefarious trade, and though they suspected the meaning of his long absences he would not admit that he was again the King of the Road.

While he ate supper he looked at Hadshaw, who was gazing at vacancy in a dull, gloomy

way. The squatter had changed a great deal during his three weeks in the swamp. His robust form had grown slenderer until his clothes hung more loosely than ever, and his cheek-bones were startlingly prominent. He was pale and haggard too, with new lines on his face and dark circles around his eyes.

A fancy that he could disguise himself had led him to cut off his beard, and he now showed that half-inch stubble which makes even a well man look half-ghostly and half-fiendish.

Plainly enough the squatter was wearing himself out by either remorse, fear, or a sense of being deeply wronged.

"Hadshaw," said Luke, anon, "I think I know what you want most of anything."

The heavy eyes moved a little.

"I reckon death's my best helper."

"No, it ain't, Burt; not a bit of it. You want to see your family bad."

"Probly they'll come ter see me ther night afore I get ther rope," was the bitter reply.

"No, they won't, Burt; no, they won't. Why? Because you won't get the rope. Any sensible person knows you're innocent; I know it, Butcher knows—"

"What of that?" shouted the squatter. "I'm poor, I am, an' it's a crime. I'm a dorg with a bad name, but how did I get it? By bein' poor. Oh! I know 'em all. Ef I had my million nobody would call me a murderer; I'd be safe then; but I'm poor, an' they'll hunt me down."

"No, they won't," said Luke, soothingly. "Butcher and I are your friends and we'll foil them all. There's Goodrod, blind as a bat, and Mr. Sneak, the looker, who don't find no great evidence, I reckon. We're enough for them all, ain't we, Butcher? But to business. Hadshaw, I think you ought to see Relva."

The heavy head lifted, a new light came to the dull eyes; but faded quickly, and the squatter shook his head.

"Tain't possible, Luke."

"I'm going to make it possible."

Again the squatter shook his head; it was his only reply.

"Hear me!" said Luke. "It is the easiest thing in the world with me to help. You can be at a certain point with Butcher; I'll bring Relva to that point and you shall see her."

Hadshaw still declared it impossible, but Luke had set his mind on having it so; though he had only his own selfish aims in view; and he carried the point as a strong mind can over an enfeebled one.

And the next day he called at the Hadshaw cabin. It was not hard to go secretly, for though Goodrod still had watchers there, they had grown negligent of their duty and played poker on a log, or stone, and never looked at the house for an hour at a time.

Luke was pleased with his greeting, though he was not slow to know it was because he came from Hadshaw. In a less degree the women showed the effects of the shadow which had fallen on the family, and they were glad to hear from the swamp fugitive.

In their solitude, too, they had not heard of Luke's re-entry to his old life of crime on the road, and they hoped he had reformed.

He made known his mission, and Relva did not hesitate. She would go anywhere, or do anything, to aid her father. Naturally, she wished to see him, and as Luke made light of the risk, it was soon settled that she should. Everything was arranged, and then the horse-thief took his leave, avoiding Goodrod's men and making his way back toward the swamp.

"Another step toward my triumph," he said, with an unpleasant smile. "They think well of me, and pat me on the back for helping them. Right! let them go on. Would Burt Hadshaw say to-day, what he once said to me, 'I tell you my daughter don't want you for an acquaintance, and I won't have you for her acquaintance'? Scarcely; we are very humble, now that we are in trouble. Bah! one of these days I'll ask the charming Relva to marry me. Suppose she refuses? Bah! she dares not; if she does, Hadshaw, squatter, hangs before the month grows old."

It was an hour later than this that Sheriff Goodrod was aroused from sleep and informed that a stranger wished to see him. He growled and snarled, but finally said he would see the "meddlesome critter."

And Jake Rockheart came in as coolly as though he did not know that Goodrod was looking for a "small man with red hair," to answer for a misdemeanor he, Rockheart, had committed in the sheriff's own hearing.

"I hear you have been asleep, and it's not the square thing to rise you up, I am aware," said the man from the ocean, bluffly, "but you see when the gale is aboard, sails must be furled if the sailors are groggy."

Ben Goodrod failed to catch the idea, but he came in bravely on the home-stretch.

"Ef that's business, spout it," he said.

"I will. My name is Rockheart—late of the world, a wanderer; now of this place. I believe Burt Hadshaw is wanted for the murder of one Elbert Bennington?"

"Yes," sourly admitted the sheriff.

"For whose capture the State offers five hundred dollars, and Hugh Bennington a thousand.

Now, sir, what share of the grand total goes to the man who can place you—you, Goodrod—where you can gobble Hadshaw without trouble?"

Rockheart leaned forward and looked at his companion with glittering eyes. He was not unlike a bird of prey himself, and the bent of his mind seemed natural.

"I'll give such a man ther State's five hundred," said the sheriff, promptly.

"Bah! Too little. Nothing short of the thousand will answer for me."

"For you?"

"Blow your buttons, yes! Of whom do you suppose I speak? Do I negotiate for Tom, Dick and Goodrod? No; I speak for myself."

"An' kin you give news by which Hadshaw kin be took?"

"I kin—nobody else kin; it kin be done."

"Do this," said Goodrod, "an' ther thousand is yourn. I'll be content with ther five hundred. I—"

"Stop for breath, my thief-catcher; you're short of it. You would give me all the reward if I asked; but I don't, as I expect shortly to have an income from another source; for you are so confoundedly jealous of the St. Louis detective that you would bury the money deeper than the ocean's bottom to get ahead of him."

"The man named Smith is an upstart—"

"Let us drop him," said Rockheart blandly.

"We will speak of our own affairs."

And when he felt sure of the sheriff, he added:

"Like everybody else, I thrust my finger into the Bennington pie as soon as I came here. To-day, there was a visitor at the Hadshaw cabin; I was a concealed listener. The visitor came to arrange for a meeting between Hadshaw and his daughter. She is a fine woman, who took my critical eye, and—"

"Who was the man?"

"An unknown. But I can tell you where Hadshaw is to meet Relva. And you can be there with your bold thief-takers and seize upon Hadshaw, eh?"

There only remained to settle the details, and when this was done Rockheart went away. He had no sooner gone than Goodrod broke into a dance which was jolly if not graceful.

"Hip-hip-hurray!" he cried, "I've found the Korriener diamond. I rope in Hadshaw an' ther man named Smith will be badly left. Three cheers an' a tiger! Home talent forever! Betsey, bring out ther jug o' whisky!"

But all unconscious of the mine being dug under her feet, Relva prepared to keep her appointment. It was not an altogether pleasant prospect; nothing short of her father's interest could have drawn her to the swamp at night with Leopard Luke for a companion.

As night drew near she became so nervous that only stern resolution hid the fact from her mother. It would have been a great relief to have one companion whom she could actually trust; every hour rendered her confidence in Luke less strong; but she did not know who would be at once faithful to her and to her father.

Strangely enough, her thoughts turned to Smith in this crisis, and more than once she found herself wondering what he would do if she should confide in him; but the idea was too wild for serious thought.

Luke was not to be at the cabin until ten o'clock, and that evening was a nightmare to the girl. The hours dragged heavily; they sped rapidly. The evening was terribly long; it passed all too quick. Yes, it passed, but Relva had grown so feverish and fearful that Luke's cautious knock made her leap from her chair.

He was very kind and sympathetic outwardly, and they left Mrs. Hadshaw hoping for the best. Once in the wood he did all that was possible to make her way lighter and easier. If she still feared, in secret, she was calm in her manner. It was an anxious journey, however.

They neared the place of meeting; they advanced to a great tree; a man came quickly from the shadow; and Relva was clasped in the arms of her father.

Luke and Butcher moved apart and gave them the chance for private conversation, but they scarcely knew there was any one else in the world for a while.

With her kisses on his face, the heart of the squatter warmed not a little.

"My leetle gal ain't gone back on me," he said, with a husky voice not common to him.

"Never, father, never. Believe me, however black your sky may look, mother and I are true to you; we believe you innocent; we will always be true to you."

The squatter lifted his ragged hat.

"I am an innercent man, an' that's One that knows it," he solemnly said. "Men may rage, but the big record-book don't show no red scratch a-standin' fur murder ag'in' me. No!"

There was a manly dignity in his manner which might have impressed even a less affectionate mind; Relva did not doubt, and she expressed her belief.

"I am so sorry for you, father," she then said. "It must be lonely for you in the swamp."

"'Tis lonely," he acknowledged; and then

went on slowly: "I hev had chainece ter reflect, though, an' wonder why you'n your mother kin car' fur me ez you do. She's eddicated, an' so be you, but I'm ign'rant, an' I'm rough an' coarse."

"We look at the heart, father."

"It'll b'ar it, ef affection fur you is ther jedg-in'-p'int. Leetle gal, ev'ry throb o' this ole heart is fur you'n her. An' yet, they say I'm a murderer, an' thar is rewards an' placards, an' sreb, posted up, Luke tells me. I'm hunted like a wild beast, I be, an' fur why? Because I'm guilty o' a sin in ther sight o' man; not murder, but poverty! Ay, that's it; I'm poor, an' that's a crime. An' that's why they hunt an' bound me, ev'ry man on 'em, big an' little. Curse them! ef they lay a finger on me, they'll find I am a man!"

"Father, be calm. It will do no good—"

"Right! It'll do no good. Ev'ry preacher from Cape Cod ter Puget's Sound won't do no good, but ef I had money it'd do good. I could buy men ter flatter an' worship me— But I ain't ther money, nur likely ter hev. I'm poor, an' under ther curse o' Poverty I s'pose I must remain."

CHAPTER XIX.

THE HAWKS OF JUSTICE AND ITS PREY.

THE squatter had worked himself up to a pitch of subdued passion which gave pleasure neither to himself nor Relva, and with her gentle, womanly ways she tried to calm him. Nor did she labor in vain. Her voice was potent with him, and, becoming composed, he showed more thought for her than for himself.

Minutes passed rapidly, but they had much to say. Each wished to soothe, calm and encourage the other, and Butcher, pacing back and forth a short distance away, was seen to draw his black hand several times across his eyes.

But the peace of the moment was delusive; they were people standing over a powder magazine toward which the fatal spark was steadily drawing.

The nature of this spark can be easily surmised; Sheriff Goodrod had not forgotten the news he had received.

And through the silent wood with an Indian-like step went the sheriff, and behind him trod a dozen other men. The first of these was Jake Rockheart, and a more vigilant man was not in the party. He was vigilant, because he was resolved to have Burt Hadshaw's blood-money, and he had little confidence in Goodrod.

The latter had poetically styled his band the "hawks of justice," but it is a fact that, instead of being filled with a lofty regard for the triumph of the Right, each and every man-hunter was dividing and multiplying with all his vigor to see what would be his share of the blood-money, and what he could do with it. Possibly, they were not unlike the average officer of law.

Nearer crept the hawks, but Hadshaw and Relva talked on unsuspecting of danger. Nearer yet! They were but a few rods away; the squatter's fate seemed poised by a thread. Nearer yet! Relva's arm was about his neck; no whisper of danger was wafted through the trees. Nearer yet!

Suddenly Hadshaw started, cast off her hand and grasped his rifle as though he would crush the barrel. A man had glided to their side; a stranger to Burt; and the long rifle was about to be used as a club when the new-comer spoke.

"Run!" he said, in a subdued whisper. "Goodrod is here with his men; run for your life, Burt Hadshaw!"

There are times when men's voices pierce all confusion like a sword. It was so then; he did not need to repeat the information. But the squatter stayed, his front like that of a lion.

"Relva—" he began; but the new-comer checked him.

"She shall suffer no harm; I swear it. Go, now, Hadshaw; go!"

The voice was potent, and the squatter disappeared in the bushes. The new-comer took Relva to the side of Leopard Luke.

"Flee, man!" he ordered. "Take this lady home; lose no time!"

And with these words he, too, was gone.

Luke and Relva were alone, for Butcher had followed Burt, but the former was equal to the demands of the occasion. He hurried Relva away systematically, and when the hawks of justice arrived at the rendezvous their prey was gone.

"Oh! you 'tarnal critter!" said Goodrod, "you've deceived me."

"Messmate," replied Jake Rockheart, "before you accuse me too surely, look for signs. We may find them."

They did find them, with ample proof that some one had been there before them and Goodrod doubted no longer.

"How they got away I don't know," he muttered, gloomily. "I'd have gi'n a good pile ter a-ketched him, and so floor the critter named Smith, but it ain't ter be."

And Jake Rockheart pulled his mustache viciously.

"The thousand dollars was but a dream; 'tis gone. But, Jake, my boy, there's another day, yet, and we may live to pocket the money."

And Leopard Luke, moved away, frowning thoughtfully.

"Who the dickens was it that gave us such timely warning? He wasn't any one I know, unless I failed to recognize him. What of yourself?"

"He wore his hat over his face so that I could see nothing, and his voice was not familiar," she replied, with an appearance of frankness.

"I can't solve the mystery at all. He vanished as soon as he gave his warning, and it really looks as though he was as anxious to keep his identity from us as from the officers."

Little did Luke suspect that even then the man who had warned them was following in his steps at a safe distance, resolved to watch over Relva until she was safe in her own home.

There was no reason why he should come nearer, for Luke was in a faithful mood, himself, and he took Relva straight to the cabin. He did not enter, but, saying he would go at once to the squatter, took his leave.

As he went, he passed within fifty feet of where the unknown stood concealed by the bushes. The latter remained at his post for some time after Luke departed. He had taken off his wide hat and was gazing at the cabin. He suspected that the events of the night were not over, and he was not surprised when Goodrod's party appeared.

The sheriff knocked at the door, and after that searched the place. He did not find Burt Hadshaw, and as he was not by any means rude there was no occasion for alarm. He went away at last, followed by his men, with the tall form of Jake Rockheart striding beside him, and then the unknown watcher quietly followed—unknown to them, but not to the reader.

He who had that night saved the squatter was the man named Smith.

It had been an unprofessional thing for him to do; a thing which would have blasted his future had it become known; but the detective believed he knew what he was about. He had not let the days pass idly since he came to Copperhead Swamp, and he believed Burt Hadshaw to be an innocent man. He also thought he knew who had killed Elbert Bennington, but it was the hardest thing of his life to obtain proof.

But whether Hadshaw was innocent or guilty, he had saved Relva from trouble and misery.

Goodrod had tried to keep his night expedition a secret, but Smith had accidentally overheard a conversation between two of the sheriff's followers which had led to the detailed result.

He knew Jake Rockheart had overheard Relva and Luke arrange for the meeting, and that he had betrayed them to Goodrod. He had foiled them as we have seen.

That night he had many dreams. In them Rockheart always appeared, and he appeared as an enemy, too.

The following day the detective sat at his window, looking out and thinking of the man from the ocean. He began to believe that the evil-faced fellow might be all Pomp suspected; if Harriet Gardner had died through foul means, he was ready to believe Jake Rockheart had a hand in the matter.

While he was thus thinking, who should he see but Jake himself? The fellow was walking through the grounds toward the house, switching the bushes with a cane as he came. Somehow he reminded Smith of a vulture then, but everything else was lost in wonder as he saw him boldly apply for admission at the main door.

Whom did he want?

With the window open it was not hard to catch the name, for Rockheart did not speak softly. He asked for Hugh. There was some delay, as though the servants thought him an unfit caller for their master, but he was ultimately admitted and taken to Hugh.

He remained there for two hours. Smith kept his place until he went away, resenting the insolent airiness with which he moved down the walk. Each time that he saw the man he gained a poorer impression of him.

Wondering what business he could have had with Hugh, the detective kept the house. But Hugh did not appear until lunch. When he did come Smith was surprised at his appearance. The firm face, which had borne Elbert's death without a perceptible shadow, was clouded and disturbed. Its calmness was broken, his movements were nervous and often vague, and he kept his eyes on his plate and avoided conversation.

Smith was surprised. He had thought him of iron; he found him to be of common clay. But what had happened to make such a change? That it had come of Jake Rockheart's visit Smith could not doubt, but what had the man said? Something startling, certainly, or Hugh Bennington would not have been thus moved.

Whatever his trouble was, the master of the Hall gave no sign. He paid his daily visit to his mother, who had gained sufficiently to sit up on these occasions, and in pausing to speak with Miss Warburton, the shadow and the sternness alike left his face to give place to a light and

tenderness Smith found no trouble in interpreting.

"He loves her as well as Elbert ever did, and she may yet be mistress of this house unless—"

A significant shrug of his shoulders finished the detective's low-spoken remark.

That afternoon he wandered over to the Hadshaw cabin. He did not enter, for on this he would not venture, but he had not been long at hand before Relva glided out and joined him.

"I saw you," she said softly, as though she did not know he had placed himself as he did on purpose to be seen, "and came out to thank you for what you did last night."

"What did I do?"

"It was you who brought us news of Goodrod's approach and thus saved my father."

"I do not deny it; it was I."

"Mr. Smith, the English language does not contain words which can express my gratitude. I can only thank you from the bottom of my heart and hope that you, too, may find a friend when you need one."

He took the little hand which wavered before his own. His composed face was less grave than usual; the mouth had a gentle look and the light of the gray eyes was very kindly.

"I need one now," he said.

"Are you in trouble?"

"No. Yet, I need a friend. Not one to help me about my business, or to fight my battles, but to think of me kindly at all times; to care to what end my wayward steps stray; to wish me success and give me unselfish good-will. It is hard to find such a friend, for I know of but one that can fill the place. The friend I want is—yourself!"

"I hope you don't doubt my friendship," said Relva, looking everywhere except at him.

"I do not. I believe in it and am proud of it. Some day, when your father is a free man again, we will speak more fully if you will allow it."

Her gaze was raised to his only to fall again; she murmured a few words which were indistinct but enough for him; and from that hour they understood each other. Storms might come, but they had begun well by building their house upon the rock.

Smith left the place in a contented mood, but his thoughts soon gave place to more troublesome matters. The Bennington murder case had assumed an aspect he did not like. His investigation had served to direct his suspicions to a man other than Burt Hadshaw, and there he had come to a stop. Sufficient proof for a case was wanting, and to arrest this man without the proof would be to raise an uproar all through Missouri.

He sat by the window and reflected on the subject until a late hour and then retired. He had hardly fallen asleep before he began to dream. He dreamed that Jake Rockheart had purchased Bennington Hall and was taking down the great chimney, a brick at a time. Each one, as loosened, was tossed at Smith as he lay in bed; and it so angered him that he awoke.

He was thinking of the matter, and wondering what a hold the man had obtained on his life, when he heard footsteps outside the door. They were so secret as to be suspicious in themselves, and Smith quietly arose, lit a lamp, opened the door and stood face to face with—Jake Rockheart!

The latter was fully dressed, even to his hat, but he had a lamp in his hand and was certainly not lost or confused. He nodded to Smith as coolly as though the meeting was of an ordinary kind.

"Good-evening," he careless by added.

"What are you doing here?" Smith curtly asked.

"I am standing here with a lamp in my hand, looking at you," Mr. Rockheart answered, with great precision.

"Does Hugh Bennington know you are here?"

"No."

"Does any member of the family know it?"

Rockheart brushed a speck of dust from his sleeve.

"No," he calmly answered.

"This leads me to suppose you broke in like a burglar."

Rockheart showed a hammer and chisel.

"I did!"

The two men stood facing each other in silence for a moment; Rockheart, swaggering, gay, amused and insolently at his ease; Smith, dumfounded at such conduct, but outwardly as cool as ever.

"I think Mr. Bennington would like to see you," he said.

"Possible? I thought not, but if you are willing we will go there. He is in his room and still astir. Come!"

Rockheart moved away and Smith followed. They went in silence. The former was as much at his ease as ever, but for once the detective was troubled and uncertain. He would not let the fellow leave the hall unquestioned by one in authority, but he had grave doubts as to how Hugh would receive them.

They soon reached his door.

CHAPTER XX.

THE POWER OF A SECRET.

ROCKHEART rapped without a particle of hesitation. There was a stir inside, followed by silence. He rapped again; there was another stir and then the sound of footsteps. The key turned in the lock, the door opened and they stood in the presence of Hugh Bennington.

Clearly, he was very much amazed to see them, and Smith noticed an anxious cast in his eyes, but Rockheart, himself, opened conversation.

"Mr. Smith wishes to speak with you inside your room," he carelessly said.

"Come in!" said Bennington, turning away.

He walked to the table, on which was a pile of manuscript papers, swept them into a drawer, turned the key and placed it in his pocket. This done he turned to his visitors. Rockheart had sat down and was smiling in his insolent way, but Smith remained standing.

"Mr. Bennington," he said, clearly, "this man," motioning to Rockheart, "has taken it on himself to say I want an audience with you. I am not in the habit of holding interviews at midnight which might have taken place at a more reasonable hour."

"Hear! hear!" interpolated Rockheart.

"But I wish to say that, a few minutes ago, I heard stealthy footsteps outside my door which were so like those of a burglar that I investigated. I found this man there."

"Meaning me," added Jake smilingly.

"When he acknowledged that he was there, not only without an invitation, but without the knowledge of any one in the house, I thought it proper that you should know the fact."

"After which, my dear Bennington, our friend, Smith, wishes you to kick me out," Rockheart added.

"Your prolific fancy fits a cap for your deserts," the detective calmly replied, "but it is not of my formation. Your future is nothing to me; I have called the attention of Mr. Bennington to the subject and my part is done."

"Unless you are requested to kick me out."

Smith did not answer; he was looking to Hugh for further directions. He hoped he would be directed to kick Jake out, but he had grave fears it would not be so.

Hugh was looking directly at Rockheart, and if looks could kill, the fellow's stay on earth would have been short. All the power, sternness and aggressive force of his nature was expressed in that look, and his hands moved as though he would gladly have laid hold of the mocking rascal; but there was something else, and that something Smith interpreted as fear.

"This seems to be a somewhat remarkable hour for a call," finally spoke Hugh, "but since you are here we may as well finish our proceedings. Mr. Smith, I thank you for your vigilance, but we will speak of this matter to-morrow. Shall I go with you to your room?"

He spoke kindly, but Smith read more than was said. Hugh might well have replied: "I am under this man's thumb; please leave us alone."

The detective wasted no more words, but as he went from the room he looked back once. Rockheart, smiling and triumphant, waved his long hand in farewell, and his triumph was complete.

When Hugh returned he found his visitor trying the drawer of the table, and a fierce light leaped into the warlike eyes.

"You infernal scoundrell! what are you trying to do?" he demanded.

"I was seeing if I could secure the papers I saw you place here," Rockheart replied, as he went back to his seat. "I easily see what you have been doing; those were old letters of the family and you were looking up certain matters."

Hugh glared at him in subdued rage.

"Well, I am inclined to think you had an object in coming here to-night. What was it?"

Rockheart produced the hammer and chisel.

"With these I broke into the house; with these I had planned to break into the chest where those letters were kept. I arrived to find the chest open and the letters gone, and I was wandering about in silent meditation when Smith—romantic name, isn't it?—chanced upon me."

"You make your confession with a brazen face."

"Shall I tell you why?"

"Just as you please."

Rockheart arose, strode to the door and opened it. His quick glance along the hall plainly showed that he was trying to make sure no listeners were there; but he had no means of knowing that a door opposite had just closed behind a listener too agile to be caught.

When he closed his own door the other one opened, and Smith came out. He again took position to overhear what passed between Hugh and his visitor. The listener in private life is a contemptible creature, but Hugh had called Smith to the Hall, and directed him to work to his utmost in the murder case. Smith listened in accordance with his instructions.

"I wear a brazen face, as you call it," resumed Rockheart, sitting down on the table, "because I hold you so—under my thumb!"

He illustrated as he spoke, and leered at the man before him. Hugh's dark face grew darker than ever with passion.

"You infernal villain!" he said, in a deep voice. "I am tempted to throw you from the window!"

"Recorded!" chuckled Rockheart. "What next?"

"Don't tempt me too far."

"Oh! here is a threat of personal violence. You mean to say, 'Jake, my boy, I'll murder you if I get a chance.' Nothing odd in that; I know your way. Bennington Hall became yours through a crime; it is not strange that you would gladly retain it by a second crime. I wonder Elbert Bennington lived as long as he did."

"Does this advance your cause?" Hugh harshly asked.

"I believe it does. I wish to show you what a thing you are; to prove that you hold these broad acres, not by Heaven's will, but as a fruit of crime."

Smith, eagerly listening, heard every word.

"Go on!" said Hugh.

"My fine gentleman, I don't want any airs. I associated with your honored father once, the venerable Jay; and though he served me a miserable trick at the end, I feel like one of the family. You follow me?"

"I hear."

"As I observed before, I hold you under my thumb. If I go out and say to the people, 'This man is rich only from the fruits of crime,' you will go down to dust and ashes. If I keep silent, it will be because you pay me for it!"

"Contemptible curl! why do you hound your talk into my ears? We have talked of this before, and it need not be repeated. Drop it! What I want now is to know what you mean by such infamous conduct as to-night's work. You promised me a week in which to consider your proposal, and if you had been human you would have kept away from here. But you are a fiend at heart; you break into my house at night, and when discovered, brave it out. What will Smith think of this affair? I tell you, dog, you have overreached yourself. This detective is keen, and it needs but a little to set his suspicions at work. Where would you and I be then?"

"Stranded, like a gasping fish, my good sir."

"Have you no apology to make?"

"None."

"Remember that my fall deprives you of your hope of being my blackmailer."

"Ay, but your downfall would give me money, just the same."

"Not if some one else sprung the trap."

"They won't; I hold the case so—in the hollow of my hand. I can prove it; no other person can. I have you on the hip, sir!"

Smith, using the keyhole to good advantage, could imagine the restraining force necessary to keep such a man as Hugh in check. That he was tempted to rush upon him and strangle the wretch could not be doubted, but the dark face was no more agitated than when it was announced that Elbert was dead. The detective admired him, then, but there was something else in his mind.

From that moment Jake Rockheart was a marked man; in him, beyond a doubt, lay the evidence necessary to bring the murderer of Elbert to the gallows.

Hugh remained silent for a while, and then his visitor spoke.

"You have been looking at the old letters. How did you like their contents?"

"What is it to you?"

"A good deal; I wanted them, too. I have half a mind to make you unlock the drawer and give me half of them."

Hugh hesitated for a moment and then coolly removed the key from his pocket and unlocked the drawer. This done he deliberately gathered up the letters, while Rockheart watched curiously, and stepping to the blazing fire, threw the whole pile into the blaze.

Rockheart uttered a little cry and sprang forward to save them, but suddenly paused. Hugh stood in his path, and in his hand was a long, slender knife which gleamed brightly in the fire-light. Rockheart recoiled and stood looking from the knife to the stern-faced man, whom he felt it was not safe to tempt further; and the letters burned to ashes while Bennington kept his place and his firm face never changed, nor wavered the glare of his eyes as he looked his enemy squarely in the face.

The man from the ocean was plainly upset for once, but he rallied after a little while and laughed an ugly laugh.

"By such a weapon Elbert Bennington might have come to his death," he said.

Hugh did not answer, but, resuming his seat, placed the knife again in the drawer and relocked it.

"Now?" he said.

Rockheart tried to assume his old, swaggering air, but it was a failure. He had received a shock which impressed even him. He shrugged his shoulders.

"I suppose I may as well go," he said, surily. "You have burned what I wanted and

the jig is up. I'll be around at the appointed time to see if you will pay me the promised sum to keep my mouth shut."

"Very well; see that you don't come before."

"Oh! I'm the most accommodating man in the world, and when I have a fellow on the hip I bear lightly on the screws. Will you light me out, or shall I demolish another lock?"

He proceeded to polish his chisel on his coat-sleeve, but Hugh, without a word, took the lamp and motioned him to leave.

Smith, of St. Louis, had taken himself out of the way in safety, but when Hugh returned he came again to the key-hole. The master of the Hall had resumed his seat at the table, and there he sat for half an hour almost without motion. When he arose it was to seek his bed-chamber.

The Hall was dark and silent. Another hour passed. Then the door of the room we have lately visited was again opened and a man came softly in. A fire-light, falling upon him, revealed the face and form of the man named Smith.

He advanced to the table and took from his pocket a small instrument of steel. He fitted it to the lock of the drawer, turned it, and with a click the bolt sprang back. He opened the drawer.

Inside lay a long, slender weapon, and as he raised it the fire-light played on the blade of the knife with which Hugh had cowed Rockheart.

Smith did not delay, but, putting the knife in his pocket, relocked the drawer and went again to his room. Once there he produced the weapon and examined it narrowly. It was a deadly-looking thing, and even the detective felt a sort of awe.

"Rockheart spoke truly when he said such a weapon as this might have taken the life of Elbert Bennington. Narrower-bladed by far than Hadshaw's hunting-knife, it would just fit the wound. And the knife is Hugh's. Ah! wealthy, proud and fashionable upper circle of Missouri, I am inclined to think you will shake to your center one of these days. A little more evidence, a very little more, and there will be an arrest in the Bennington murder case, nor will the hawks of justice seek to feed on Burt Hadshaw!"

CHAPTER XXI.

LEOPARD LUKE'S RAID.

THE King of Horse-Thieves was rapidly regaining his old reputation, and he enjoyed it intensely. He liked to be thought a wild, reckless fellow, a dare-devil; and forgetful of the fact that Jay Bennington was no longer alive to help him, he went straight on in his career.

He left Burt Hadshaw and Butcher alone in the swamp the greater part of the time, and during his occasional visits he lied glibly to Burt, and laughed the negro's warnings to scorn.

To the latter he made no explanations, and he needed to make none; the old negro knew his weakness. And, devotedly attached to the young man, Butcher tried his best to win him from his ways, and failed.

Leopard Luke, however, was planning an expedition which he believed would give him undying glory. There was one pig-headed feature about it, in that he wished Relva to think well of him, and then deliberately forfeited all claim to her regard; but nothing could equal his desire for notoriety.

At dusk the next night a score of men were camped in the edge of Copperhead Swamp, while near at hand were as many horses. They were Leopard Luke and his band.

"Another half-hour, and we'll move," said the chief, addressing Fetlock Phil. "We'll take them just after supper, and come as a dessert. Egad! I shouldn't wonder if they deserted the places."

This threadbare attempt at a pun brought no smile to the lieutenant's face.

"Our chances would be a good deal better to wait until midnight," he suggested.

"True, true; but—a word in your private ear, Phil. We will make ourselves a name to-night which shall ring from the Atlantic to the Pacific. Mark my words!"

Fetlock Phil was silent for a moment, and then he broke into a reckless laugh.

"Go it, then, and we'll make old Missouri ring."

Luke was very much pleased, for Fetlock Phil was a pupil he was pleased to think a good deal like himself, and whom he was trying to make as big a rascal. Phil, it will be remembered, was yet more than a year short of his majority, but he was like clay in Luke's hands and bade fair to come to the gallows if his leader lived to finish his training.

A little later the entire party mounted, rode from the swamp and toward the village. It was the motto of the occasion, "Don't leave a horse to pursue us!" and as the raid was unexpected by the villagers, there was a chance that it would be carried out.

At that moment Sheriff Goodrod and some of his men were assembled with the town magistrates to consider a plan submitted by the former for getting at Burt Hadshaw. Goodrod,

constantly haunted by the fear that "the man named Smith" would outstrip him and capture the murderer, was growing poor each day.

His mind was put to untold tortures, and every day he developed a new plan for consideration. He had proposed to drain the swamp and send in a regiment of soldiers; to reach the interior by means of balloons; to cut down the entire wood, a tree at a time; and to flood it by turning the Missouri river into a new channel.

All these plans having been discarded as impracticable by the town magnates, Mr. Goodrod was arguing in favor of getting a hundred or so cannon and shelling the place night and day until they drove out the squatter.

"He'll find it a poor place to squat!" cried Goodrod, in enthusiasm with his plan and with his joke.

Whether it was to be, or not to be, had not been settled when there was a sudden noise outside. There was a regular pounding as though a troop of wild horses were clearing the town; but, anon, a clanking and clattering made an ex-soldier exclaim:

"Cavalry!"

And then upon the air burst the shouts of men and the report of revolvers, and Goodrod sprang to the window.

"Thunderation an' blue blazes! it's ther hoss-thieves!" he exclaimed.

And then he caught up his own revolvers and leaped through the window, leaving the magnates to themselves.

Goodrod, as the leader of the law-and-order element, had not come any too soon. The horse-thieves were charging the town and yelling like fiends unloosed, and a natural timidity was shown by the citizens about making targets of themselves.

But the sheriff, with all his petty faults, was brave enough, and he darted at a crowd of men, the greater part of whom seemed intent on trying the efficacy of a log cabin to ward off wild lead.

"Hold, thar!" he cried; "don't run a step farder. Up, an' fight fur yer altars an' your fires. Ther hoss-thieves are on your peaceful s'ile an' thar won't be a huff left when they're gone ef we let 'em choose their time. We must drive 'em out. Rally! rally! Who's with me?"

Goodrod was flourishing his revolver aloft when a man stepped briskly to his side and a voice said:

"I am!"

The sheriff stood aghast; it was the man named Smith.

"You?" he gasped.

"I!" replied Smith, coolly. "Who is number three?"

The sight of the lion and lamb lying down together—all knew how Goodrod hated Smith—stirred the citizens and they each and every one expressed a desire to go into the fight. The sheriff managed to swallow his immense surprise at being backed by Smith, but he was truly a patriot. And so they rallied for the fight.

The horse-thieves had receded, firing at men and buildings as they went, but Goodrod knew they would soon return. Such being the case, he resolved to worry them, at the least. Abe Jackson, who kept the store, had a huge pile of empty cases at one end of the building, and in a very short time a barricade was formed across the street.

In doing this, Goodrod now and then found a heavy case in his hands; and every time this occurred it was Smith, of St. Louis, who helped him shoulder it. Smith was everywhere, unless the sheriff's eyes deceived him, and he began to believe there were several of him.

The raiders having gone to the further side of the village now turned and began galloping back. Their course was marked by jets of fire which looked like small rockets, and their yells were certainly remarkable for volume of sound.

Mr. Goodrod, watching them intently, forgot all about his own army until the man named Smith touched his elbow.

"I wish to say that we may need a little support," the latter mildly remarked.

And then the sheriff, looking around, saw that his heroic defenders were stealing silently away. But they were foiled; Goodrod brought them back with loud shouts, and they crouched shivering behind the barricade.

On came the horse-thieves, and ever and anon four words pealed from their lips, followed by prolonged yells:

"Hurrah for Leopard Luke!"

"Five hundred dollars reward fur that bird, boyees," reminded the sheriff.

"We'll have it!" declared the army.

Nearer came the outlaws, and it seemed as though they either failed to see the barricade or intended to take it at a jump. Goodrod set his teeth tightly. Nearer yet came the riders; then, with a sudden swerve, they turned to the left and a voice cried:

"Charge the hotel! Let's sample the whisky!"

Goodrod turned cold with horror.

"Fire!" he shouted.

His own revolver and one other cracked. He turned like a tiger. Of all his army, only Smith, of St. Louis, remained near the barricade.

"I think, sheriff, the other fellows have an engagement somewhere which they prefer to this engagement," the detective coolly observed.

"It won't work; they can't slide away in that style; I'll bring 'em back or bust their cowardly heads!"

And away went Goodrod in pursuit.

In the meanwhile the horse-thieves had reined up before the hotel and Luke and Fetlock Phil were inside calling for liquor. The landlord mourned his loss but dared not refuse, and a barrel was rolled out and tapped in a brief time. Then the desperadoes drank as much as they chose.

While they were doing it, Luke had posted on the hotel wall a placard beginning with a death's head and cross-bones and ending with his name, which breathed defiance for the officers of the law of the county in unmeasured terms.

This preliminary attended to, he remembered what ostensible business had brought them to town and passed the word that contributions of horses were wanted, and his men were directed to "pass the hat."

By this time, however, Goodrod had again collected his army, and a scattering fire was opened on the marauders. Two men were slightly wounded, and this stung the rest to a fury. They made a charge, and though several more shots were fired at them, the bold citizens broke away in hot haste—all but the sheriff.

He had fired the last shot—Smith was not visible then—but in starting to flee had caught his toe and fallen headlong. As a result, he was quickly seized by the horse-thieves.

All that was evil in the natures of the marauders was by this time aroused. The whisky was working, and their wits had gone out with its entrance, and the fact that they had some wounds to bind up was enough to turn them hotly against the sheriff.

"Hang the old scoundrel!"

It is a favorite cry with a mob, and Luke's cut-throats hailed it with pleasure. They executed almost as quickly as they planned. A rope was found and run over a limb which brushed the side of the hotel, a noose was formed for Goodrod's neck and only Leopard Luke's word was wanting.

He gave it, and in a moment more the sheriff was dangling in mid-air.

CHAPTER XXII.

A HUMBLER KING.

BENNINGTON HALL stood a little back from the village; just far enough not to be a part of it and yet near enough to be a part of it, as old Jay used to express it when he was the high-living and reckless master of the plantation.

On the evening of the horse-thieves' raid it so happened that both Hugh Bennington and Smith were away. Where the latter was we already know; where the former had gone no one at the Hall knew.

Tidings of the trouble at the village was brought to Augusta Warburton just as she emerged from Mrs. Bennington's room after seeing her asleep, and the frightened female domestics clustered around the young lady as though for protection.

Augusta did not give the matter much thought at first. Lacking a knowledge of the nature of the trouble she supposed it to be only a village quarrel; possibly, no more than a playful demonstration on somebody's part; but the negroes were so disturbed that they soon knew that neither Hugh nor Smith was to be found.

Miss Warburton had retired to the parlor and was trying to read when a new and more energetic alarm was borne to her. The marauders had galloped up to the Hall and were about to bring out and appropriate the horses, despite the entreaties of the sable grooms.

"Dey am hoss-thieves!" added the news-bearer.

Horse-thieves! Augusta Warburton heard the name of a class of men she had been taught to detest above all others who roved the soil of Missouri. Her own father had lost horses at their hands, and she had the impression that if justice was done every creature of the kind would be effectually prevented from stealing in future.

And now they were at the Bennington stable to rob her host!

The warm blood of the fair Southern girl rebelled against the idea. What could be done? Hugh was not there to stem the tide, and the negroes were like clay without a leader. She knew what was wanted and formed her resolution quickly.

She knew where the family weapons were kept and she hastened to the place. A moment later she emerged, followed by the domestics, and each one bore a rifle, or shot-gun, or revolver. Miss Warburton's face was heroic, and even the negro girls look ominous.

It was but a few steps to the stable, and they arrived there just as the first Bennington horse was being led out. Leopard Luke and three men were the only marauders visible.

All difficulties had seemingly been passed, and the man with the horse was very much astonished when a woman appeared in his path and a revolver yawned just before his nose.

"Stop!" cried this apparition in a firm voice.

"You advance another step at your peril!"

The man paused and stared as though his eyes had been blinded by a sudden rush of light, but there was an impatient exclamation, and Leopard Luke pushed to the front.

"What's the matter here?" he demanded.

"Why don't you—"

He paused abruptly. He saw Miss Warburton, with her firmly-held revolver, and close behind her several negroes, who had been given rifles and other weapons by the women. The needed leader had appeared, and the negroes looked grim and ominous.

"There is a good deal the matter, sir," declared Miss Warburton. "These horses which you seek to appropriate belong here, and here they will remain. You are not wanted, and you can go as soon as you see fit."

Luke, who was wonderfully impressed by this mingled beauty and bravery, stammered unintelligibly for a moment; then a red flush crept into his face, and he cried hotly:

"Who are you who dictates to the King of the Road? I am Leopard Luke!"

"I thought as much," answered the girl, who was not struck dumb by the name, as he had expected; "and I find you in a business worthy of your name. But, sir, you can't have the Bennington horses."

"By Judas, I will have them!"

"I will shoot the first man who tries to lead a horse from the stable," said she with increased firmness. "You see the armed men behind me, and that we are three to your one. I don't believe the time has come when Leopard Luke will set about the task of murdering a dozen men in cold blood, but the time is always ripe for people to defend their own."

A cheer arose from the negroes, and there was an ominous handling of weapons. They had caught Miss Warburton's brave spirit, and she was like a heroine of old; and each and every one of them became a hero.

"This is folly, miss," said Luke, argumentatively. "You are acting foolishly. What can you and those negroes do against my braves? You only draw our wrath upon them."

"We will risk it," she steadily answered, and responsive cries arose from her followers.

Leopard Luke was silent for a moment. He was not afraid of the army in front of him; he would have charged them boldly with his handful of men under proper circumstances; but Miss Warburton had touched the proper note when she declared that he was not ready to murder them all.

For the negroes, he cared little; but he did have the prudence to know that if he injured the lady he could hope for neither admiration nor mercy in Missouri.

"Hark ye, madam!" he cried, suddenly lifting his head, "I am not to be baffled. Stand aside, and give us passage; we will have the horses, or, by my life! we'll set the stable on fire!"

"In that case, the men will turn on the water. We have ample means for extinguishing a blaze," was the calm reply.

Again Luke hesitated. All the ugliness of his nature was aroused, and his wiser self was arguing against the impulse to go ahead rough-shod, cut and shoot freely and, finally, to leave Bennington Hall and the outbuildings in ashes. For reasons of his own, and because he hated the family, he would gladly have done this, but it would bring a storm of indignation on him and his band.

One other artifice was open to him and, still keeping his eyes on the stable-floor, he leaped forward with cat-like agility and seized Miss Warburton's wrist. In another moment her revolver would have been wrested away, but they were not the only people in the drama.

Even as he caught her wrist he was himself seized in the grasp of a gigantic negro, and as he was flung back his heels struck a pail and he went headlong into a trough filled to the top with water.

Every one stood half-stupefied as the sullen splash was heard, but after a brief commotion of the water the King of the Road came out, dripping wet, his face dark with rage.

"That settles the case!" he cried, madly. "I'll leave the Hall in ashes and as many corpses here as you desire. Boys—"

What he was about to order will never be known, for at that moment a shrill, peculiar whistle sounded outside the stable and every horse-thief stirred into new life. Leopard Luke saw the eyes centered upon him and dared not brave them. The whistle meant danger, and its tone showed that it would not do to delay.

"Boot and saddle!" he cried, shaking the water from him like a dog; but as his men, abandoning the horses, shot from the door, he fixed his gaze on Augusta and added: "I leave you conqueror, this time, but you shall see me again. You shall, and I'll have you at my feet; I swear it, my beauty!"

And Leopard Luke was gone; gone with a clatter and pounding of hoofs, a few defiant

yells and a rapid retreat, and Miss Warburton had indeed won the battle.

When Smith, of St. Louis, disappeared from among Sheriff Goodrod's men, it did not by any means follow that he had deserted the sinking ship. Instead, he had gone to strengthen the weak parts. He had seen that the cowardly element Goodrod had enlisted was composed of besotted village loafers; and as he was impressed by the idea that the bravest men would be found preparing to defend their own homes, he went to gather some of these men.

Thus it was that, just as Ben Goodrod was drawn up on his extemporaneous gallows, a deftly-thrown bowie-knife cut the rope with a twang, dropping the sheriff back to the ground, and then with terrific yells a new body of men burst upon the scene with Smith at their head.

They had come on business, too, as the horse-thieves found to their cost. A man near Luke fell from his saddle pierced through the heart, and a hot sting along his shoulder told the leader he was, himself, grazed.

He saw Smith and all his hatred surged to the front.

"Here's at you, Sneak," he cried, loudly. "Take that for your reward!"

He had raised a revolver, but it was struck up, and Luke saw that his men were in retreat. It was no wonder. The villagers had aroused at last, and from every quarter they were centering at the hotel.

The King of Horse-Thieves saw that he was baffled for the night, and that to attempt to rob the village of its equine property would be madness. Accordingly, he gave the signal and away went the wild company.

The detective found his hand grasped by Goodrod.

"Smith, o' St. Louis, you're a baked brick; I'll be chewed by a painter ef you ain't!" he cried, with enthusiasm. "You've stood by me ter-night like a John o' Arc, an' you've saved my life, you hev. You're chain-lightnin' in disguise an' I'm proud ter say it. I've been a mule-headed ox ter buck ag'in' ye, which same I likewise acknowledge. I hope ez how we may now bury ther hatchet an' clinch it down. Hay?"

"Willingly, sheriff, willingly," said Smith, frankly.

"I only ask," said Ben, lowering his voice, "that you'll remember my name ain't Goodrock, nur Goodhead, nur Goodyear, but Goodrod."

"I'll do it," the detective promised.

"Good, sir, good. Now, feller-citizens I propose three cheers fur Smith, o' St. Louis, who is ther John o' Arc o' this hyar town!"

No one except Smith knew that the worthy sheriff was a little wild in his historical reminiscences, but that wouldn't have counted, anyway; the cheers were given with a will.

Just then came a messenger from Bennington Hall to say that the horse-thieves were there, and away went Goodrod and his recruits to look into the matter.

How they arrived and frightened away Leopard Luke and his men we have already seen.

The rescuers were just too late to make a capture, so they contented themselves with congratulating Miss Warburton on her courage.

They were still there when Hugh Bennington strode toward the group, a rifle in his hand and his dark face anxious and covered with perspiration.

Augusta had gone to the house to reassure Mrs. Bennington, but Smith soon satisfied Hugh that all was well. The latter then made a hearty, neat little address, thanking all, including his negroes, warmly, after which Goodrod returned to the village.

Hugh and Smith entered the house, but while the latter went to the library, Hugh went in search of Miss Warburton. He met her in the hall, and as the door was open Smith could see them, though their words were not audible.

He judged by what passed that he complimented her on her bravery, and both smiled a little, but their faces grew graver after a moment. Something was in Hugh's face, however, which seemed to account for a sudden drooping of the girl's head; and as he kissed her hand at parting Smith abruptly arose and went again outside the Hall.

For nearly an hour he paced back and forth, looking ever and anon at the lighted windows. Never in his professional experience had he felt so low and unmanly. Knowing what he was destined to bring to Hugh Bennington, he despised himself for eating his bread. True, he had been invited there, and he had never gone outside his profession, but there was something about Hugh which would have made him a pleasant companion had Smith known less how Elbert Bennington died.

CHAPTER XXIII.

ROCKHEART MEETS BUTCHER.

THE cabin in which Rebecca Gardner died had not been opened since that woman was conveyed to her last resting-place. Mr. Charingway had offered it to any of the slaves

who wanted it, but, though more comfortable than the majority of the others, no one would live there.

Old Rebecca had not been beloved by the negroes. She had all the pride of a dweller in a palace; she had clearly thought herself their superior; and they had never liked her. Then, in her last sickness, she had talked wildly of hidden crimes, of blood-money and unrighted wrongs; and it came to be generally said among the colored people that Rebecca had sold her soul to the Evil One years before, and that he had frequently visited her in her cabin.

Hence, none of them wished to occupy it.

On the evening of the scenes last described the old building stood as usual. Dark, gloomy and silent, the negroes made *detours* rather than pass it. And the wind, sweeping around the corner, wailed dirges, as though to mourn for Rebecca's sins.

Anon, a dark, heavy figure stole softly, hesitatingly toward the cabin. It reached the wall, hesitated, pushed the unlocked door ajar, hesitated again, and finally crept hesitatingly inside.

Then followed the striking of a match and the lighting of a lamp the man had brought, and the light, flaring up a little fell on the black face of Butcher, the swamp hermit.

His face was not composed then. His parted lips, his anxiously-turning eyes, and his nervous air were all indicative of actual fear. He looked about the room closely. Everything was as Rebecca had left it; a little care had been given the bed and that was all.

Satisfied that no goblins were then lurking in the room, Butcher placed the lamp on the table and proceeded to muffle the windows so that no light would shine through them. He plainly wished the plantation negroes to know nothing of his movements. What, then, was he there for? No one had ever suspected him of being a burglar.

Once more he paused and looked searchingly about the room. Every article of furniture and every corner was minutely noticed, and he seemed to meditate on each one carefully.

"It's most likeliest dat it's in de chest," he muttered when the scrutiny was over. "Miss 'Becca was a proper car'ful woman when she sot out dat way, an' she wouldn't leave it whar nobody could find it easy."

The last idea seemed to strike him forcibly, for he shook his head slowly.

"An' I'm afeerd I can't find it easy."

He went to the chest; a heavy, old-fashioned box after the fashion of a trunk; and tried to lift the cover. It was locked. While he hesitated as to his next step he saw a bunch of keys hanging near it. They were Rebecca's, and it was not hard to find that which opened the chest.

It contained nothing which interested Butcher, though he paused for some time to view the old, faded garments which told of the dead woman's younger and gayer days. But there was nothing but clothing.

Butcher did not hesitate, but continued his search in other places. Every article of furniture was closely scanned, every corner was peered into; places were searched where nothing larger than a sheet of paper could have been concealed, anyway; but when the search was over he had gained nothing by it.

He sat down in a chair to think. He had heard that in her last hours Rebecca had talked strangely, and this visit had come of the news. He had expected to find something which ought not to fall into the hands of the common herd, but he had been baffled.

"Ef dar's sech a paper I'd a'most gib a year ob my life to find it, but how kin I do it? Ef Massa Jay kin look down on 'arh, he's biddin' me find it, but how kin I do it? Ef dis cabin was to burn to de ground, dar would be nuffin' left to tell any'fing dat shouldn't be knowed."

The temptation to apply a match to the place was strong, but Butcher was not an incendiary and he abandoned the idea with the thought that if he decided it to be really necessary he could come again.

He replaced everything in the old order, extinguished the light, opened the door and stood face to face with a tall man who immediately pushed into the cabin, driving Butcher before him.

"Touch off the light again," ordered the newcomer.

Butcher obeyed, trembling, for he believed Charingway had caught him and would visit some dire punishment upon him; but when the light flared up he saw that the tall man was not the master of the plantation.

"What have you been doing, Butcher?" demanded the stranger.

"I—I—stopped to rest, sah," stammered the negro.

"Stopped to catch whales?" retorted the tall man. "Don't lie to me, Butcher. You were after old Rebecca Gardner's confession."

"Indeed, sah, I don't know nuffin' what you mean," Butcher said, but his frightened face belied his words.

The tall man took him by the button.

"Butcher, you don't know me, do you?"

"No, sah."

"Yet, you did thirty years ago. My name is —Jake Rockheart!"

Butcher recoiled, his face looking as though he saw old Rebecca's ghost, and putting out one hand feebly. The man from the ocean smiled in high enjoyment and showed his usual fancy by sitting down on the table.

The prodigal son has returned, Butcher, after many years. Jake Rockheart, after sniffing the air of every ocean and every land known to man, is again on his native heath. He don't find many of his old friends to welcome him. Jay Bennington and the sisters Gardner are dead. You and I, though, are as lively as ever. Eh, old boy?

"I'm taken all aback," said Butcher, vaguely.

"Whisky is good for it; take some when you get home. For now, talk common-sense. I've returned after many years with the resolution to fill my pockets with gold, and I see you are on the same trail. Let me see Rebecca's confession."

"Don't know nothin' about it," said Butcher, with the stoutness of returning courage. "Don't know dat she made one. I wa'n't here when she died."

"No, but you have undoubtedly heard, as I have, that she sent for Hugh Bennington in her last hours, only to be wandering in mind when he arrived and unable to talk coherently; but that she muttered of having taken Jay Bennington's money as a bribe to keep a guilty secret, and that she also gasped about some 'paper' as she died. You're no fool, Butcher, and you clearly see that this paper was a written confession. Of what, you can imagine. All this has percolated through your head, Butcher; otherwise, why are you here?"

"I was passin', sah," stubbornly answered the negro, "an' I thought I'd stop ter rest whar Miss 'Becca used to live."

"Rubbish! You've been overturning this whole shanty for two hours. I know it, for I've been outside. I was there because, as you had fastened the door while you rested, I couldn't get in. Now, my gay Butcher, give me the paper."

"Hahn't got no paper," Butcher defiantly replied.

"Perhaps you are willing I should search your pockets?"

"Yes, sah, I am."

And he proved it by submitting to the search. We need scarcely say nothing was found.

"You've bid it over again," said Rockheart, suspiciously.

"Hahn't see'd no paper, nur no nuffin'."

Rockheart smoothed his mustache for a while in silence, watching the negro keenly. He decided that Butcher was indeed telling the truth.

"Then we are really baffled," he finally said. "Well, so be it. Let us go; I want to talk with you."

The speaker unceremoniously extinguished the candle, and then both men went out together, leaving the cabin as before. Rockheart linked his arm into his companion's and they walked away in the direction of Copperhead Swamp.

"I've been trying to see you ever since I returned, Butcher," said Rockheart, "but nobody could lead me to your retreat. It seems good to meet you, old boy, for we are all that's left of the old crowd. Where is Jay? Dead! Where Harriet? Dead! Where Rebecca? She died miserably over there, and she lived miserably. The taint of Jay Bennington's gold was on her and it is no wonder people said she had sold herself to what's-his-name. I was less easily molded, you know."

Butcher did not answer.

"Old boy, it's now for you and Jake Rockheart to make a goodly pile of money. Put our joint knowledge together and we make an irresistible team. You are a negro, 'tis true, but in the court we appeal to color won't make an iota of difference."

Butcher stopped, turned partly around and looked his companion in the face.

"Marse Rockheart," he said, steadily, "we may ez wall have a understannin' right away. I ain't glad to see you, sah. I nebbet liked you, an' I refuse to be your pardner. What you know, you know; but what I know I shall nebbet tell you, sah. Let dis settle de matter right away."

"Nonsense, old boy!" Rockheart airily answered. "You won't be so foolish as to throw the gifts of the gods away; of course you won't. Come; join your fortunes with mine and you shall see all the foreign lands I have seen."

"No!"

The monosyllable was firmly spoken. Rockheart looked at the old negro with an evil expression, though he caressed his mustache in silence for some time.

"So you despise money?"

"I despise your offer. Massa Jay gib me money enough to keep me all my days, and ask me to keep my mouf closed. I say, Massa, I will; I swar it! An' I will."

"You had a bundle confided to you that night," Rockheart went on, his evil expression increasing. "What did you do with it?"

"Dat, sah, is what nobody but me knows."

"Wrong, loyal Butcher, wrong. Let me whisper!"

The man from the ocean whispered one brief sentence, which made Butcher recoil. His confusion was plain to be seen, and he did not answer at once.

"I have you on the hip," Rockheart serenely observed. "You dare not deny what I've said; I'll make it the worse for you if you do."

"Go on, den, sah. I deny all; you are wrong; I deny all!"

"You infernal old donkey, I am tempted to knock your head against a tree!"

"Dat won't do you any good, Marse Rockheart."

"Sdeath! but it will. I should be in business—as a fool-killer."

Rockheart took the old man by the shoulder and shook him, whirled him around like a top, and, on the whole, seemed trying to worry him as a dog does a rat. Butcher submitted in silence, but this fact was not encouraging; it showed that he had a will of his own.

And though Rockheart kept him in conversation for an hour longer, he failed to make any impression. Butcher was as quietly firm as the Rock of Gibraltar. Equally futile was the tall man's request to be taken to the negro's swamp home; in fact, they disagreed on every point.

His ill-success threw Rockheart into an ugly mood, but he made a pretense of yielding in the end, and Butcher went away. But Rockheart followed, as had been his intention from the first, and thus he was led into Copperhead Swamp.

Cunning Butcher, however, was not ignorant of the pursuer, and it came to pass that after a mile had been traveled Jake found himself alone; the negro had disappeared completely.

Having no other course, the man from the ocean submitted to his fortune, though not without a good deal of profanity, and turned his back on the interior of the place.

Naturally, he went astray in the darkness, and it was not until he had floundered into enough mud to almost disguise him that he finally found his way back to the village.

An uglier man than he was not to be found in Missouri when he crept up to his room, wet, weary and disappointed.

CHAPTER XXIV.

LEOPARD LUKE PROPOSES.

LEOPARD LUKE effectually established his reputation as a dare-devil the night of his raid. When it was known that he had charged and almost captured a town, men paid homage to his talents in that line, but his glory was a good deal dimmed when it was known that he had been baffled by a woman and thrown into a water-tub by a negro.

But there are ups and downs in all callings, and Luke necessarily had his. On the whole, his band was doing well. A large number of horses had already been stolen and disposed of, and Missouri was ringing with his name.

In his short-sightedness, the horse-thief chief believed himself a great man.

He went to Copperhead Swamp very seldom of late, but he did not forget any of those in whom he was interested. Especially did he remember Relva Hadshaw, and the afternoon of the day following his raid found him near the cabin.

He did not venture out boldly until he had made sure the coast was clear, for he knew there was no real safety for him around the swamp; but as no one was in sight, he finally walked boldly to the cabin, and knocked for admittance.

Relva opened the door, and Luke was too much absorbed with his bow to see that her face clouded instead of brightening. He was invited in, however, and made happy to a certain degree by hearing that Mrs. Hadshaw had gone to the village for supplies.

"You do not ask after your father," he said, after a pause.

"Is he well?"

"About the same as when you saw him last. His troubles wear on him to a certain degree, but he keeps tolerably cheerful."

"He has the consolation of being innocent of all crime."

"Yes, and that's no small thing in itself."

Relva did not answer, and there was a break in the conversation, something which occurred at intervals until Luke began to grow more observing.

"You don't seem to be in your usual spirits," he said.

"Perhaps the change is in you."

"In me?"

"Yes."

"In what way have I changed?"

"I did not say you had changed."

He looked at her searchingly for a moment, and then continued:

"Have you had bad news?"

"I will be frank and say I have heard something I would rather had not been. I have heard what happened at the village last night."

Luke's face clouded. He had sown blindly; he was now to reap with his eyes open.

"I suppose Sneak has been here," he bitterly said.

"Whom do you mean?"

"No matter. Sol what have you heard? Tell me!"

"That Leopard Luke, the horse-thief, is at work again; that his hand is against Missouri and its honest people; that a reward is offered for his capture."

"All this is true," he replied, with a laugh.

"You acknowledge it?"

"Why not? I'll never go back on my trade."

Listen to me, Relva Hadshaw. I have the misfortune to be poor, and as a poor man I am ground under the heel of the rich. I don't like this; I rebel. I believe the world owes me a living; I resolve to obtain it. What then? I become a horse-thief and, lo! where I had one friend before I had a hundred. True, the rich hated me, but it was because I was equalizing the wealth of the land. And this I hold to be just and right; there should be an equality of wealth. Hence, it is no crime for me to steal from the rich. Or if it is, I am justified in that I seek to be a man among men."

He delivered this remarkable argument as earnestly as though it was not deformed, hollow and false in every feature, and he seemed to expect Relva to believe it.

"Have you deceived your conscience to this degree?" she quietly asked.

"What do you mean?"

"Simply that I cannot accept your doctrine if you do—which I can't believe."

He repeated his argument at greater length, and really seemed to begin to believe in it, himself, so specious did his eloquence make it appear, but Relva was not so easily moved. Then he moved forward and laid his hand on hers.

"Relva, this grieves me," he said, pathetically. "Your good opinion is something I so earnestly desire that I am grieved to have lost it. I am sorry we differ on this one point."

"I think we had better not speak of it further. You will remember it was fully discussed a year ago, and that you then made no excuse for yourself beyond saying that you were not going to drudge for a living when you could live more easily. Your peculiar philosophy seemed to have been lately formed."

Her manner was gentle, but he flushed under even so delicate an attack. His armor was thin and he was easily touched.

"Is this my reward for sheltering your father?" he demanded, peevishly and ungenerously.

"Wait, Luke. Have I spoken to you harshly? No! you were a friend to my father in his hour of need, and for that I would hide you here, if you needed it, even though I knew it would cost me dearly. For father's sake, I say, God bless you! but do not expect me to look on horse-taking as being right."

"Horse-taking! Bah! call it horse-stealing. That's the name I give it; I don't shrink from plain words. So it's a sin! To destruction with preaching; I don't care a fig for fine words and ideas. I have my way of living, and there's many a proud beauty smiles in return when Leopard Luke lifts his hat. Why, they'd even have me in polite society in St. Louis if they dared. Perhaps I will go there when I fill my pockets. People call me King of Horse-Thieves, and so I am. Leopard Luke, at your service!"

He doffed his hat to some imaginary person and then laughed merrily.

"Come, Relva, shorten that pretty face into a smile."

"Not at such talk as that."

"Nonsense! Listen to me! I want your good opinion, little girl, and I'll tell you why. I love you! Come, come, don't start, my girl. Is it a thing to be afraid of? My heart is like a giant blacksmith in size, and every beat of the hammer is a note of love for you. Hear it! Come, little one, say you love me and will be my wife!"

He endeavored to catch her in his arms, but she sprang up, retreated to the wall and put out her hands imploringly.

"No, no!" she gasped, "don't touch me. Keep away!"

It was not her words, nor her attitude, but the look on her face was as eloquent as a hundred words would have been. He saw the disgust and horror which was in her heart, and he paused in spite of himself. One of his hands moved restlessly on the back of a chair, and his face was white and trembled. For a time he was silent, and then he put out one hand and spoke vehemently:

"This—this is the way my love is received!"

Relva burst into tears.

"Luke, oh! Luke, why do you ask it? You know my nature is not like yours, and—"

"Oh! no; of course it isn't; you come of better stock, you do. There's no stain on the Hadshaw escutcheon, and they're a high-toned family."

"Luke, I did not mean that. Why do you willfully persist in forcing a quarrel upon me? I have spoken kindly and I mean kindly, but I am frank."

He resumed his seat, leaned back and tipped his hat well back on his head.

"I'll be frank, too, my lady," he insolently

said. "I dare say I owe all this to Mr. Sneak, but we'll leave it out. I have a laudable desire to be frank. Relva Hadshaw, I hold your father's life in the hollow of my hand. Promise to marry me and he is safe; refuse, and, by my life, Goodrod turns the key on him before to-morrow night!"

He had spoken plainly at last; the mask was thrown off; and as he sat there acting the part of a bully toward the girl he seemed fit for nothing else so much as for a specimen of human wolf.

Relva stood like one stunned; she could not doubt Luke's earnestness, and she was trying to see some way through the overhanging clouds by which her father could be saved. She remained silent so long that he spoke again and demanded her decision.

A long conversation followed, in which she tried to move him to pity, and he again and again repeated his proposal.

"It's my ultimatum," he asserted. "Marry me and save Burt Hadshaw; reject me and the quatter goes to the gallows. I swear it!"

Before another word could be said, the door opened and a man entered the cabin. He walked quietly to a seat, sat down and revealed the calm face of the man named Smith. Both Relva and Luke looked at him in dead silence, and he held their gazes steady while he deliberately drew a cigar and lighted it.

This done, he blew out a wreath of smoke and fixed his own gaze on Leopard Luke.

"Allow me to say," he then observed, calmly, "that your little game will not work."

Another silence, brief but impressive, followed, and then Luke found his speech.

"What in perdition are you doing here?"

"I certainly am not abusing a lady."

"Oh! that's where the wind blows, is it, Mr. Sneak?" cried the horse-thief, with his old manner. "You seek the favor of Miss Hadshaw and resent the presence of a rival."

"If matters were as you say," replied Smith, calmly, "I should not fear such a rival as you. But that is not to the point. You say that unless this lady marries you, you will betray her father to the officers. I say you will not."

"I won't, eh?"

"No!"

"How will you prevent it?"

"If necessary, by arresting you at once."

"I'd like to see you take me."

"But as I am not quite ready to nip your operations in the bud," continued Smith, blowing a wreath of smoke upward and watching it critically, "we will compromise."

"Oh! we will, eh?"

"Yes."

"We'll do nothing of the kind, Mr. Sneak."

"You will swear not to betray Burt Hadshaw," calmly remarked Smith, of St. Louis.

Luke brought his fist down on the table with such force as to make the firm wood shake.

"I will not do it!" he declared, with a more forcible addition.

"In that case, the horse-thieves lose their leader."

Luke looked at his rival with an evil smile slowly creeping over his face.

"You take a singular stand for an officer of law, Mr. Sneak. You say Burt Hadshaw shall not be arrested?"

"He shall not be betrayed by you."

"Suppose this news reaches St. Louis?"

"Meaning that you threaten to send it! If so, do as you see fit. The question now under consideration is: will you swear not to betray Hadshaw?"

"I will not swear."

"Very well; then I shall take you to the village and deliver you to Sheriff Goodrod."

"All right, my boy," replied Luke, with his reckless laugh. "I am ready. Are you?"

Both men arose, but Relva, who had grown paler than ever, made a warning gesture to Smith unseen by Luke. Her fingers then moved in the mutes' alphabet, which they had discovered both knew, and flashed this message:

"Beware! His readiness to go is because he intends to murder you on the way; I feel sure this is so. In Heaven's name, be very careful!"

CHAPTER XXV.

IN COPPERHEAD SWAMP.

THE warning was understood and appreciated. Smith nodded twice in quick succession.

"We shall be rather antagonistic traveling companions," he said, calmly, "but we shall get along very well together. Constant vigilance is the price of safety."

Leopard Luke returned a surly reply, but Relva knew her warning was comprehended and, though she disliked the situation, she trusted to Smith to care for himself. The two men went out together; Luke paused for a moment to remark casually that there was many an unmarked grave in Copperhead Swamp; and then they walked on side by side.

Relva watched them with increasing anxiety. To her mind Luke's readiness to accompany Smith was in itself suspicious. They did not

seem like prisoner and captor as they went, and Relva had an active fear that the horse-thief had some plan in view which threatened Smith with danger.

She had not suspected before that the safety of the man from St. Louis was of such importance to her; but her uneasiness so increased that several times she resolved to follow them, only abandoning the idea when she remembered that there were a thousand ways through the swamp, and that they were doubtless beyond her reach even then.

They went steadily for a mile or so, Luke being in a very happy mood, if appearances were reliable. He sung snatches of song, and was quite boyish in his ways, but Smith, calm and silent, did not for one moment expect to take him into the village. He felt sure he would weaken on the road.

They reached a part of the swamp which was the densest on the road, without adventure, but Smith was soon brought to comprehend that he had overlooked one possibility of the case and given cause to bitterly repent his mistake.

The first sign came when Luke suddenly turned and flung himself bodily on him in an attack which Smith could easily have defied ordinarily, but he staggered a little as he saw the other men appear on the scene—men who were strangers to him, but who were at once ordered by Luke to seize him.

After that he needed no explanation; they were members of Luke's gang.

It was a hard struggle, despite the odds—a noble battle for life and liberty; but it could have but one ending.

It ended by Smith being overpowered and bound securely.

"Hal Mr. Sneak, how goes the battle now?" Luke sneered. "Perhaps you want the contract to take me to the village again?"

"I'll do it some day," Smith coolly answered.

"No you won't!"

"A difference of opinion, that's all."

"A big difference. You see, Mr. Sneak, being in a position to speak accurately, I know your career is nearly over. Lookers are not wanted around Copperhead Swamp, and as you persist in meddling with what don't concern you, I am now going to put you where you won't do any more mischief."

"Possible?"

"You shall see. Boys, we will postpone the plans we laid, for I have another matter in my mind. March!"

The gang moved away, with Smith in their midst. He walked as freely as any of them, knowing the uselessness of resistance, and too proud to give Luke any satisfaction.

He was practically helpless. His wrists were bound together at his back, though his feet were left free.

To say that he was at his ease would be to go aside from the truth. He was outwardly as calm as ever, but he had grave fears as to the result of his adventure. He was wholly in Luke's power; there was little or no hope of rescue, and he knew the horse-men hated him most cordially.

Copperhead Swamp had kept many a secret before; it might keep the secret of his death.

They went on without any halt into the depths of the swamp. It had never seemed gloomier to Smith. The tangled way, the moss-covered trees, the pools and lagoons, the floundering alligators and the serpents that glided, hissing, from their path, were not calculated to lessen the gloom of his situation.

Luke was not moving aimlessly; he had a definite purpose in view all the while; and when he paused it was on the bank of a place which was a sort of sunken pool, or bowl, and so situated that a person might pass within two rods of it and never suspect its existence.

Smith, as he arrived, had a view of an alligator which floundered away in the dark water, and then the horse-thief turned to him with a dark look on his face.

"Smith," he said, more seriously, "you've been the worst drawback to my success I've had since you came to the swamp. You've meddled with me, and you've done it in a way which makes me hate you as I never hated man before. You are too infernal cool for my liking. Now, I won't have you in my way any longer; you've got to die. How? you will ask. Mr. Sneak, it will be in a way which will give you a taste of misery. I'll now proceed to illustrate."

He went down the bank to where, on a sort of muddy beach, several trees of medium size arose. They were in the bowl, so-called, but not touched by the water.

Luke selected one from among the rest and then called his men down. Smith was firmly bound to the tree in an upright position and facing the water.

There the men left him without a word of explanation, and he was left to look and think for himself. His only companions were two alligators, which were surveying him with evident curiosity from the other side of the pool.

Sounds soon reached his ears as though the horse-thieves were doing some kind of work.

This continued for half an hour and then they came back.

"How do you like it?" Luke mockingly asked.

"Tolerably well, so far."

"Do you know what we've been doing?"

"No."

"Well, we have formed a dam at the point where the water leaves this pool so that no more water can escape until the bowl is full. The top of the bowl, you will see, is about two feet above your head. Consequently, when the bowl is full your head will be two feet under water. I hope I make myself plain. We shall leave you here with the alligators and the water. The pool is fed by springs from its lower part, and I calculate it will fill in just about six hours. You will have the pleasure of seeing it rise. When it reaches the level of your mouth, you can drink if you happen to feel thirsty. After that you'll be obliged to drink, anyhow!"

Luke burst into a laugh, in which he was joined by his men. Not one of them felt sympathy for the man thus condemned to a horrible death.

"It will interest you," added Luke, "to see the water rise inch by inch, submerging you as it comes."

"Glad you mentioned the fact," Smith calmly replied.

"One other thing: you have probably noticed that there are two alligators in the pool. These playful fellows, you know, have a decided penchant for clipping off legs and heads. Perhaps they'll decapitate you."

Luke punched his prisoner in the ribs.

"I'm duly obliged to you for remembering all this," the detective said, "but it would be a pity if your plans miscarried."

There was just a ripple of menace in the even voice, but the horse-thief could afford to disregard it. He had the fullest faith in his invention.

The gang hovered around the pool for some time, watching their dam to be sure it performed its work. It did; and the gradually rising water already lapped Smith's knees. Evidently, the bowl would fill inside of five hours.

"We will now leave you alone and bestir ourselves on other business," said the outlaw leader, "but we'll try to be around to your funeral. Any word to send to the fair Relva?"

"I'll carry it around myself, to-morrow."

"You'll be a dead man before dark, Mr. Sneak; don't you think you won't. Between the water and the alligators you haven't a ghost of a chance. See the charming fellows grin at you! Open countenances, they have, haven't they?"

"Decidedly."

"Well," added Leopard Luke, "we'll leave you now. With such companions you can't be lonesome."

He waved his hand toward the alligators, laughed mockingly and turned away. Smith heard the horse-thieves recede and then he was alone.

He looked the scene over carefully. Luke had made no mistake. The bowl was admirably fitted for the purpose he had in view and, dammed up as it was, would fill as desired. After that, death would be swift and certain for the prisoner—if he remained there.

Without waiting any great time he gave his bonds a trial. They held fast. He put forth every possible effort, twisting and struggling, but by the time he had about used up his strength he found that it was wholly useless. No weak knots had the horse-thieves tied.

His struggles were viewed with manifest curiosity by the alligators. Not having a very extensive acquaintance with man, it was clear they could not see what this one was doing in the pool.

When he came quiet, however, they showed a laudable willingness to learn. They slid into the pool, crossed and came lumbering up on the northern bank. This brought them within forty feet of Smith, and their movements began to seem ominous. The detective watched them with increasing uneasiness. The man was evidently a puzzle to them. If they understood what he was, they could understand what he was doing.

Luckily, they showed no disposition to advance nearer. But from their point of view they were as vigilant watchers as could have been found.

Smith's situation began to be serious. The water arose steadily. Already it touched his hips. He could not see the dam, but it was a weak hope to try to believe it had been made too weak for its purpose.

The minutes passed on. The water had arisen half-way from his waist to his shoulders. The end was drawing near all too rapidly.

The alligators, too, began to arouse from their quiet state. Perhaps they grew hungry and thought it time to look for food. At any rate, they passed entirely around Smith, viewing him from every point, and then slid into the water and moved toward him.

He felt a thrill of horror. A brave man may face death with a calm face, if it comes in an ordinary form, but not at the jaws of alligators.

The creatures looked so ugly and repulsive that Smith recoiled and instinctively lifted his voice in a call for aid.

"Hallo! Help! help! Hallo—o—o!"

CHAPTER XXVI.

"HELP! HELP!"

THE cry floated off through the swamp, but not clearly nor to any great distance. It was dull and heavy, like the air of Copperhead Swamp, itself. It did not reach the ears of any human being except him who uttered it, but it had the effect of driving the alligators back. It was something they had not expected.

Smith had a reprieve, and it struck him he could use it to no better advantage than to renew his call for aid. Between the water, which was nearing his shoulders, and the saurians, he had a poor chance for seeing the sun go down.

"Help! help!"

His cry arose, but it seemed to him that it went no further than the pool. The air was heavy and a mocking inflection seemed to linger around him.

For several minutes he continued his calling. When he ceased the alligators again approached. This time one traveled by land, and came down to the water's edge, where he stood looking at the detective, while the other lumbered along through the water.

Smith viewed this fellow with uneasiness. A bold push on his part would at any moment close the career of the detective.

"Help! help!"

Again the cry sufficed to drive him back, but it was only for a short time; both reptiles drew near for renewed operations, and they showed less fear than before.

Smith was painfully aware that he was in great danger, and he began to use his voice with vigor. Again and again his cries arose, but only the dull sound of his own voice answered. He kept it up, however, hoping that some one—possibly Goodrod, or his men—might be abroad in the swamp.

Higher still arose the water; it covered the tops of his shoulders; he presented no more to view than an apparently bodiless head; and still the water arose.

The detective was in miserable condition. The cold water chilled him through, and his chattering teeth almost prevented him from calling for help. But all this seemed about to end; between the alligators and the water his shivers bade fair to be of short duration.

"Help! help!"

Again he called, nor was he silent afterward. Life depended on bringing some one to the pool speedily.

The largest alligator came quite near, and looked at him with twinkling, evil eyes. It was as though the saurian knew his exact situation, and, like Leopard Luke, rejoiced at his sufferings.

Higher arose the water. It touched his chin. The end was near. A little more time and his career would be past. A dull feeling like a stupor stole over the detective. He resigned himself to his fate; he gave a glance at the past and future. He had no near living relative, but in that hour he thought of Relva. He wondered dully if she would ever inquire for him.

His mind was wandering away when the water was splashed in his face. He opened his eyes and saw the alligator even nearer, but he did not heed him.

There was a new sound, however, though Smith did not hear it. There was a crackling of brush, and a man appeared on the edge of the bowl. His gaze took in the scene before him, and he uttered a cry of horror. He supplemented it by a loud shout to alarm the saurians, and Smith looked up stupidly.

"Help! help!"

It was but a whisper, and he was not conscious of uttering it; and then darkness and oblivion stole over him.

How long it lasted he did not know. When consciousness returned he was lying on a couch of pine boughs, and a good-sized fire roared and crackled before him. All this he saw before seeing any other signs of life, and as he was warm and comfortable he lay still, and let his mind wander lazily.

But it speedily grew clear and strong; he remembered his late adventure, and suddenly sat erect.

The movement brought another man into sight, and Smith saw—Hugh Bennington.

"Hallo! are you up at last?" Hugh kindly inquired.

"I believe I am, but I'm not quite sure. Where the dickens are we?"

"Still in Copperhead Swamp, but in a tolerably safe place. I've been trying to get some warmth into your body."

"I faith, there was need enough of it a while ago. And the rising water and the alligators. Hugh, was it you who took me out of that difficulty?"

"Yes," said Bennington, smiling.

"By George, I owe you a life. I can't repay you for it just now, but my thanks are yours, warmly and fully, and some day I'll show you that I don't forget such a good turn."

They were standing face to face, and Smith was shaking Hugh's hand heartily, but he suddenly lost color and seemed to recoil.

"What's the matter?" Hugh asked.

"A twinge of pain, that's all," muttered Smith. "I reckon I'll sit down again for a moment."

He did sit down, but it was not bodily pain, or weakness, which had troubled him.

He had suddenly remembered the murder of Elbert Bennington, the long-bladed knife and other things connected with it—and now Hugh had saved his life.

And when Hugh saw him hovering over the fire and looking so miserably, he added:

"You went beyond your strength then. You've had a hard pull and should take a little time to recuperate. But you'll come out all right."

Smith groaned inwardly. Hugh had left his coldness temporarily behind, and his kindness was adding to the debt of obligation. And he was compelled by professional duty to be the means of dragging him to ruin.

"When we get back to the Hall we'll put you in the hospital," Hugh added, with a quiet laugh.

"Take care that your kindness is not misplaced," Smith muttered.

"Nonsense! I'm always ready to do what I can, and I've not studied you in vain. Frankly, you don't seem like an officer anyway, and some time I expect you to make me a friendly visit of a month at least. But, enough of this. I am curious to know how you got into such a peculiar fix as that in which I found you."

"I owe it to Leopard Luke."

"Ha!"

"Yes."

"That fellow is getting unpleasantly active it strikes me."

"Bennington, I don't think I am a particularly revengeful man, but Leopard Luke has done that to-day which will make him serious trouble. He shall pay to the uttermost the debt he has incurred!"

Smith spoke without raising his voice, but there was a steel-like ring about it which went further than words. Hugh nodded quickly.

"Don't fear making a mistake in hunting him down. Leopard Luke is all bad. I have been a little easy on him, for, from some unexplained reason, my father used to be prejudiced in his favor, but he is a curse and disgrace to Missouri. Stop his work and win the gratitude of the State."

Smith gave a fuller account of his adventure, only omitting to state that it had begun at the Hadshaw cabin, and finally came to the point of asking how his rescuer happened to be in the swamp.

Hugh's face grew grave and stern.

"I'll tell you in secret, though you need not mention it. I am hunting for Burt Hadshaw."

"For Hadshaw?"

"Yes. It is clear to me that Goodrod will never accomplish anything. He is not exactly an incompetent man, but he could never get the squatter out of Copperhead Swamp. This task I have taken upon myself. Every day, after this, you will find me here searching for Hadshaw. I was here when the horse-thieves came to the Hall. And here I mean to come, always hunting, until the murderer is captured. My brother must be avenged!"

The speaker had reached out and taken a rifle which leaned against a tree, and with this weapon firmly grasped he looked as ominous as a veritable life-hunter. Smith was dumb with amazement, and as he found no words for reply, Hugh finally put the rifle aside and devoted himself to increasing the fire.

The subject was not renewed.

Smith's strength and energy soon returned and the two started for the Hall! No adventures occurred by the way and they neared the place in due time.

It was clear to Smith that Hugh had something of unusual importance on his mind. He was moody and uncertain, going from unnatural buoyancy to dark and fixed meditation. All this Smith saw, but he did not succeed in interpreting it to his satisfaction.

Just before reaching the Hall they entered a little group of trees where Smith had never been except when carelessly passing through. Hugh, however, paused at this point for a moment and looked to one side. The detective following his gaze, saw something white dimly gleaming through the bushes and was about to remark upon it when Hugh passed on quickly.

The incident, however, lingered in Smith's mind, and he improved the first opportunity to return secretly. Penetrating the bushes he looked for the white object and found it what he had expected—a marble gravestone.

It was neither large nor pretentious, and the inscription was simple.

"HARRIET.

"DIED OCTOBER 10, 1839. AGED 20."

This was all, but it was enough to recall to Smith's mind the story of the Gardner sisters. One of them, Rebecca, he had seen die. The younger, he had been told, died when just twenty years of age. This, then, was her

grave. He read the inscription aloud in a thoughtful manner. It told very little; he wondered what was the real story of the past.

Nearly thirty years before Jay Bennington and Jake Rockheart had been visitors of the Gardner sisters. Harriet died suddenly, and Rockheart as mysteriously disappeared. Since his return he had talked strangely of his going. And Rebecca, too, in her last moments, had declared that she took Jay Bennington's gold as a bribe to keep a guilty secret.

What was that drama of the past? What had been the secret Rebecca had been hired to keep? What had been the facts of Harriet's sudden death?

"The mystery has been sleeping for nearly thirty years, and nearly all the actors therein are dead," murmured the detective. "Jake Rockheart alone can explain it."

"Right, my man, right!" said a mocking voice at his side.

Smith wheeled abruptly. Rockheart himself stood before him.

CHAPTER XXVII.

ROCKHEART'S RULING PASSION.

THE man named Smith was a good deal surprised by Rockheart's sudden appearance. He had come as abruptly as did the imps in the old ghost stories to the men who sold their souls for temporary gain to a party at present unpopular.

But Rockheart was wholly at his ease, and he caressed his mustache with an indolent motion.

"As you correctly observed, I am the only man that can explain the old mystery," he added.

"I shall be pleased to hear the story."

"What's it worth to you?"

"Worth?"

"Ay. How much will you give for the secret?"

"I am not a speculator. I judged by your manner you desired to relate it."

"My dear sir, every man has his ruling passion. Mine is to look out for Number One. When I tell a secret I want to make something out of it."

"I'm afraid you'll have to go to another market, then."

"Just as you say. 'Harriet; died October 10, 1839, aged 20.' Brief, that inscription. Wonder why her surname was not added? Strange things, these gravestone inscriptions are. They tell a little and keep back a good deal. And their peculiarity is to hide what one most wants to know. 'Harriet, aged 20.' Good, what there is of it. Eh?"

Rockheart looked at Smith with an evil expression.

"You knew her, I believe?"

"Yes. I knew Harriet, aged eighteen, nineteen and twenty."

"A fine girl, I have been told."

"Couldn't be excelled. As an old friend, I am glad to see you have an interest in her. It is kind in you to come here. Few people have, as these bushes prove. 'Died October 10, 1839.' Elbert Bennington was born in '31, and Hugh in '33."

"Why do you associate them with her?"

"To show the antiquity of the stone."

A smile curled Rockheart's thin lips and he looked so evil and mocking that Smith felt like taking him by the neck.

"Mr. Rockheart, what is this secret you possess? You were the associate of Harriet and Rebecca in their early lives. You know some history connected with them not known to the world at large. What is it?"

"Every man has his ruling passion; I have mine. Make it an object and I will relate the sad and sorrowful secret of our sleeping sister."

Again Smith felt a strong desire to strangle the mocking wretch, but, instead, he held his temper and used every possible artifice to make his companion betray himself by some incautious speech, if not by a direct statement. He might as well have saved his breath; Rockheart was "too cunning to be trapped," as that person triumphantly announced.

"For the last time, do you want to buy a valuable secret? It is a trifle old, but warranted sound, gentle and a good roadster. What say?"

"I say that you and I had better part. I want no more of you," Smith replied, in disgust.

"Just as you say, I'll take my ruling passion down to the village, where I am going to put it through its paces in another cause. Until we meet again, good-day!"

He tipped his hat with a mocking air and then sauntered away, singing the chorus of a drinking song.

"As evil a dog, in his way, as I ever met," thought Smith. "He will bear watching, though I can't say I expect much good from it. He's too long-headed to betray himself."

And then he walked back toward the Hall. But it was not until he went to sleep that he forgot the lone grave and the mystery of "Harriet, aged 20." She had died four years before

Hugh was born. Then, why had the latter looked so strangely toward the grave as they passed?

With some vague theories, but no definite one, Smith lost all in sleep.

In the mean while, Rockheart had gone straight to the village and to the house of Sheriff Goodrod.

"Benjamin," he said, familiarly, "I am now prepared to look my former attempt to capture Burt Hadshaw squarely in the face and go it one better. This time—do we work on the old terms, which said one thousand for me?"

"Yes, I reckon so," Goodrod replied.

"Excellent. You see I want to know because it's my ruling passion to look out for Number One. Well, Benjamin, I am prepared to guide you to Hadshaw's hiding-place."

"No!"

"Yes!"

"Where is it?" Goodrod eagerly asked.

"In the heart of Copperhead Swamp, as you have always said. You see, Benjamin, I was really born for a detective, and I've gone into this business like a thoroughbred. How, it matters not. Enough that I am prepared to lead you to Hadshaw. Once there, you must catch him."

"That's what you said before."

"I shall always believe somebody blowed before; a thing we'll take care don't happen now. As for the catching, it'll be easier than before. Hadshaw—I've seen him—is in a cabin on a knoll in the heart of the swamp. It is a place difficult of access, but I say I can lead you there. Well, they tell me the murderer is a hard fighter. Such being the case we proceed with caution. It is advisable to drop on him when he is asleep. In order to do this we time ourselves, or, going early, hide around the knoll and keep our eye on him until he goes to sleep. See the point, Benjamin?"

Goodrod said he did, and his perceptive qualities were not rendered any the slower because he knew Burt Hadshaw was a hard man in a fight. Better take him when asleep, by all means. Perhaps Goodrod had heard that in that way the African Hottentots like best to attack the lion.

The following morning Leopard Luke appeared on the swamp island at an early hour. Hadshaw was still sleeping, but he met Butcher at the door and asked him to step aside.

"Were you away from the island yesterday afternoon?"

"No, sah," Butcher replied.

"Are you sure?" Luke demanded, looking at him keenly.

"Why, o' course I be, sah."

"Did you hear anything in the swamp that sounded like a call for help?"

"No, sah."

"Well, was Hadshaw away?"

"No, sah. Neither ob us left de island all day long, an' I, fur one, didn't hear no cry fur help. I hope you wasn't in trouble, Massa Luke?"

The last remark was unheeded and unheard. The horse-thief, looking at the ground, muttered that something was strange, and it was not until the squatter emerged from the cabin that he aroused. He then greeted him cordially, but Butcher noticed the cloud on the young man's face, and knew something had gone wrong.

In good truth, there had. Luke had discovered that Smith had escaped, and his questions referred to this matter. Again, everything was wrong at the Hadshaw cabin; he had recklessly unmasked himself to Relva, and only Burt now looked upon him with approval.

He felt, too, that in going so far with Smith he had aroused an enemy who might do him great harm; and the King of Horse-Thieves was shrewd enough to know he was being hunted for far and wide by other foes.

Even Copperhead Swamp was not a place of safety.

He remained on the island until noon, feigning to be in good spirits, but not deceiving Butcher. The faithful old negro was in a miserable mood. Devoted to Luke, he saw him drifting to ruin, and was unable to interfere. He tried that day, with his gray head bent and his old voice quivering, but Luke contemptuously commanded silence.

After noon he went away; but he never knew that in going he passed near an armed body of men who were slowly proceeding toward the island.

These men went on very slowly, but equally surely. Sheriff Goodrod and Jake Rockheart were in the first boat, and it was the man from the ocean who directed their course.

It was he, too, who finally cried out, excitedly:

"Oars up—here we are! Go slow, or the bird will take alarm. Go slow, I tell you!"

And then, under Rockheart's directions, the boat's were pulled to the north bank of the island, where they were concealed as well as was possible. He had yet to show his companions positive proof, but the island was as he had said.

Then he and Goodrod crept up the bank

alone, straining every nerve to prevent discovery.

"Look for yourself," the guide finally said. And Goodrod, looking, saw a cabin from the chimney of which smoke was arising. Before further words could be spoken a man came out, rifle in hand, and stood gazing thoughtfully about him.

It was the squatter. As much as he had changed, the sheriff could not avoid recognizing him.

At last he had his eyes on the man he had so longed to capture.

"How's that?" Rockheart asked, noticing his companion's glistening eyes.

But Goodrod did not answer. He was feasting his eyes as a miser does upon his gold. He breathed quickly and his fingers moved as though he longed to grasp his prey. A truce had been patched up between him and the man named Smith, but Goodrod could not forget the glory which would be his when he outstripped a St. Louis detective.

While he looked, another man appeared, coming toward the cabin. He, too, was known to the sheriff. It was Butcher.

The negro approached Burt and the latter spoke.

"Whar hev you b'en?"

"Only to see Massa Luke away, sah."

"He's rally gone, then?"

"Yes, sah. Why?"

"I don't know why."

The squatter ground his heel in the earth for several seconds and then looked up again suddenly.

"Durned ef I know what's ther matter with me, Butcher," he said. "I've suddenly taken with ther blues. I feel like ez though I was wrapped up in ice round hyar."

He pressed his hand on his heart.

"Chills comin' on, mebbe, sah."

"Tain't ther chills. I've had 'em an' I know. This 'ere is wuss. Butcher, I hev a good mind ter git outer this an' go ter ther cabin."

"Bress us, sah, you wouldn't do dot, would ye?"

"I hev a presentiment o' trouble," Hadshaw went on, his face dark and gloomy. "What-e'er ther matter is, I dunno; but I'm afeerd all's not well at ther cabin."

And from this opinion Butcher could not change him, try as he would. The squatter had the "blues," most decidedly and he was not to be comforted.

He would have been less at ease had he known the island was surrounded on every side; that only a respect for his prowess kept Goodrod from moving at once upon him.

But after the light in the cabin died out, they crept forward like panthers in stealth, like wolves in courage.

And in the cabin Hadshaw slept.

CHAPTER XXVIII. THE BLOW FALLS.

Goodrod directed everything by signs. The man-hunters entered the cabin. Hadshaw and Butcher lay asleep on their beds of pine branches. The squatter lay nearly on his back and his broad breast arose and fell with a heavy motion. One arm lay across his breast and the other rested on his rifle which lay by his side. Even in his sleep he was in a degree on the alert.

Then as many men as could get into the work flung themselves upon him. They gave all their weight to the attack and pinioned his arms. He awoke and bounded like a lion in the snare, but no delay had been made about using the cords and he was soon bound hand and foot.

He lay glaring at them after they drew back in a way which made some turn aside, but not a word passed his lips. Some of them, however, caught the idea that he was marking each and every one and registering a vow of revenge.

Butcher, on awaking, found a revolver menacing him, and he had sat staring dumbly ever since. He seemed to realize the force of the calamity and he stunned thereby.

"Wall, I reckon ez how we are all hyar," Goodrod cheerfully observed, at last. "Boys, chuck on a bit o' wood an' let ther fire bleeze clear an' strong. We've plainly got ter make a night on't. Some o' you, too, tie up ther nigger."

These orders were obeyed. Butcher submitted to all without a word, but when he was tied he was aroused by a punch in the ribs and looked around to see Rockheart.

"I say, old boy," that man asked, "don't you wish you had chipped in with me and got your share of the loaves and fishes?"

"Massa Jake, you hyar?"

"As you see."

"Fore de Lord!" cried the negro, suddenly, "it was you who brung de ossifers here!"

"So I did, my venerable friend, and that means a thousand dollars for me. It's my ruling passion to look out for Number One. When Hadshaw is hung I shall be a rich man."

"You don't know what you hab done, sah," said the old man, in a trembling voice.

I have a tolerably vivid suspicion of the

nature of my game. Profit and loss, old man—and you're a fool that you didn't chip in and take your share. You wouldn't conduct me to this retreat, so I dogged you here."

"You don't know what you hab done," Butcher repeated.

"What d'ye mean?"

"No matter, but you've made a big mistake. May dere be marcy for us all."

"You'll need it, old man, because you'll go through the mill for harboring a murderer. That means ten years in prison. See what you won and lost, now, when you wouldn't chip in with me, don't you?"

"You don't know what you hab done, sah."

And with these words Butcher turned his face to the wall and lay for a long time motionless.

By and by Hadshaw's gaze became fixed and he called the sheriff to his side.

"Ben," he said, unsteadily, "this is hardly ther turn one human critter should do another, is it?"

"Tain't no wuss than you did ter Elbert Bennin'ton."

"Nee'bor, I never did Elbert Bennin'ton a mischief. His blood is not on my hands. I sw'ar it!"

"Ther court'll settle that."

"How'll they do it, Ben? Will it be fa'r an' squar'? Does any poor man git an ekul show in his fight fur life? Ben, your bed's one o' roses, 'longside o' your office, but you know ef I go ter trial it is all day with me."

"Not ef you're innercent," Goodrod stubbornly replied.

The squatter groaned aloud. He had hoped to move the sheriff's heart, but it was very plain that he could hope for nothing in that quarter. And with the meshes of evidence so strong against him it seemed to raise the shadow of the scaffold in his path.

He did not give up then, however, and he tempted Goodrod in every possible way. But it was all in vain; prayers and bribes fell alike on the sheriff's ears.

It was a wretched night for the prisoners. Neither slept at all, and the old negro seemed half-stunned. Whenever he was addressed he muttered his old assertion—"You don't know what you have done!" And these words, they vaguely understood, did not refer to himself, but to the squatter.

The following day the village people went wild with excitement when Burt Hadshaw was brought in. Men, women and children stared at him as he passed and whispered that he was a desperate-looking ruffian. Alas! for the accuracy of human eyesight. The squatter, marching with drooping head, was haggard, thin, and the most wretched-looking man in the place.

He was consigned to the jail, and then Goodrod showed his first touch of human feeling. He told one of his men to go and inform the prisoner's wife and daughter, and to tell them they could see him every day in prison.

Rockheart, hearing his order, asked and received permission to be the messenger; and thus it came about that, going through Copperhead Swamp, a man sprung out and confronted him with a torrent of angry words.

"Leopard Luke!" muttered the man from the ocean, taken aback for once.

"Leopard Luke, it is, you infernal hound!" roared the horse-thief. "Oh! you meddling, diabolical villain, I am tempted to smask your head."

"As an incidental item, that's all right, but if the expense isn't too great, tell me why."

"Didn't I tell you I wouldn't have Hadshaw captured for a fortune?"

"Yes."

"And you professed friendship for me?"

"Yes."

"Well, I wouldn't have had Hadshaw captured for half of Missouri. You knew this, and yet you dogged me through the swamp to the island and then brought the bloodhounds of law there to seize the squatter."

Luke wound up with a string of invective harsher even than his first, but Rockheart had recovered his usual composure.

"If any one is to blame, it is yourself," he coolly replied. "If you had confided in me, and shown me good reason why the fellow should not be captured, I would have bowed to superior wisdom. As it is, if the cat is in the fire you have only yourself to blame."

"I am 'empted to kill you—"

"Don't! You see what has come to Hadshaw."

The King of Horse-Thieves broke into a curse and stood scowling like a king of pirates. Rockheart watched him closely for a while and then smiled in his old way.

"I believe I see where the shoe pinches."

"What do you mean?"

"You wanted control of Hadshaw's fortunes so that you could also control his daughter. You love her; she hates you. You relied on your power to bend her to your will. 'Marry me or I will hang your father,' you would say to her."

"I don't deny this, for it is true," Luke replied, more calmly. "But, Rockheart, you

don't know all. Burt Hadshaw was as necessary to me as the air I breathe. All my hopes and plans were founded on him, and you have hurled them to ruin. I would give two thousand dollars—it's all I have in the world—to get him out of jail. By Judas! I'll do it if I tear down every stick and stone of the old shanty!"

Luke had taken off his hat and was wiping away the perspiration which had gathered on his forehead, but the last words came out like hot shot. Rockheart started back a little. There was something about the matter he could not understand. He tried to see in what way Hadshaw could be so useful to his companion and failed.

Silence reigned between them for some time, and then Leopard Luke lifted his head.

"Curse you for a black-hearted hound!" he bitterly exclaimed, "you have ruined me forever. I could kill you for it."

"Don't try," said Rockheart, as coolly as ever. "I am sorry if I have put your nose out of joint, if you'll allow so vulgar an expression, but it's all your fault. If you had trusted in me fully at the beginning—"

"Why should I, when you were an utter stranger?"

"I told you I was your friend."

"Bah!"

"Anyhow, you can't blame me. It was your fault."

A look of mad fury passed over Luke's face, and with a motion so quick that it could not be avoided, he struck Rockheart full in the face. The man from the ocean went down like a log, and then Luke stepped back and held his rifle advanced. But Rockheart did not rise at once. He came up to a sitting posture, and then rubbed his hand across his head as though he was dazed. He opened his mouth, too, and spat out clear blood, but this done, he looked up at Luke, and there was a cruel smile on his face.

"That blow will cost you dearly, my lord duke," he said, in a strained voice.

"Come and have it out," Luke retorted.

"No."

Rockheart slowly arose, and after ejecting more of the red fluid from his mouth, he added:

"No; the time is not come. You struck me unawares, and it was a coward's blow. If I touched you now I should kill you. But I want you to live; to live to be my slave!"

The cruel smile lengthened, and the thin lips opened until he looked like a laughing tiger. Then, as Luke looked at him uneasily, he abruptly said good-day, and started off. Luke called to him, and he stopped.

"Perhaps I have been hasty," said the horse-thief, "but you drove me to madness."

"Say nothing about it. When I strike in return it will not be hastily. I shall have every loophole guarded and every line planned. Mark my words, young man, you shall repent that blow to the last day of your life."

"Talk, all talk!"

"So far, it is; but it won't always be so. When I bear on the screws, look out for me. And, mind you, no treachery. Jake Rockheart is an old bird, and not easily caught. Look to it you don't rouse his anger again. Good-day!"

At the last word the man from the ocean turned and strode away. He did not once look behind him. Leopard Luke looked until he was out of sight, and then turned gloomily away. The King of Horse-Thieves was in a mood far from pleasant. With Butcher captured, and the secret of the island known, he had lost his best retreat, and he felt ill at ease. Being in such a mood, this new quarrel troubled him more than he would have confessed.

CHAPTER XXIX.

SMITH GAINS A CLEW.

SMITH was not in the village at the time when the squatter was brought in. Instead, he was away on an errand which had arisen out of his investigations in the case of Jake Rockheart. It had come about in this way:

Finding the only communicative person in the vicinity to be Pomp, the negro first visited by Rockheart on his return, Smith went to him again and questioned him closely in regard to the relationship the man from the ocean had borne to Jay Bennington and the Gardner sisters in old times.

The only item which he gained was that the captain of the vessel in which Rockheart was said to have left New Orleans, in 1829, lived at a town twenty miles away.

It was to visit this ex-captain that Smith had left the village for a time.

He found him to be a man of seventy years; a veritable sea-dog, bluff and hearty; but it was not until he had explained his calling that Captain Roper could be made to remember Jake Rockheart. At least, he said he didn't, but Smith read his face better than he intended and the name of the law proved potent.

"Understand me now," added the detective. "Rockheart is back in this country again, but I am no friend of his. You need not be afraid to talk freely."

"Well, I'll do as you say, though I wish this matter had never been dug up. Jake Rockheart went with us because he was obliged to.

"He didn't know he was a member of the crew until we were well beyond port."

"Then he was kidnapped, or impressed, or whatever you call it?"

"Either word will do, I reckon. I'll explain. In 1829 a man came to me in New Orleans and asked me if I would take a sailor aboard for my voyage if he was drunk. I replied in the negative. Then he said: 'I will give you a thousand dollars to take such a man on your next voyage and keep him with you for six months. He will want to get away, but he mustn't. Hang to him like a barnacle and the money shall be yours.' I was a tolerably conscientious man, and I had a due regard for my own safety, so it required a long interview to make me consent to this plan. But a thousand dollars was a goodly sum in 1829, and I finally consented."

"Wait one moment," said Smith. "Who was the man who was driving this bargain?"

"I don't know and never did. He wore a big beard and long hair, and his face and hands were very much bronzed, but I could almost swear all these things were false and the man cunningly disguised. That's the truth, as I'll swear."

"Go on."

"The stranger showed a good deal of skill in planning, and the name of Rockheart was duly entered on my books. On the night of our departure from port a man who seemed much the worse for liquor was helped aboard by the other men and stowed away in a bunk as Rockheart, after which the other man left."

"We sailed at dusk. The next morning Rockheart came to his senses and a madder man I never saw. The amount of profanity hurled at me rather staggered me, old sailor that I was. He also swore that he had been kidnapped to hush up a secret, but he never called a name in my presence."

"The very violence of his passion served to work off his wrath in due time, and as I had talked plausibly to him he finally said that as long as he was in for it, he would make the best of it. He went to his station, and a more willing man I never saw. He learned rapidly and was tolerably well liked by his messmates."

"But when we were three weeks out he came to me one day and said his life was in danger; that another sailor, a new man named Oakes, was watching for a chance to murder him; that he could not go near the rail, or into the rigging, when the night was dark, without Oakes hovering near him, watching for a chance to throw him overboard; and ending by declaring the man was placed there by the same party that had kidnapped him and for the purpose of murdering him."

"It was a grave charge, but I watched Oakes and came to the conclusion that it might not be unfounded. Be that as it may, I kept an eye on Oakes and favored Rockheart all I could. But I'll do him the credit of saying he didn't seem afraid. Despite this, however, there came a time when, as we were about to touch at port for water, Rockheart was missing. I thought at first he had been made away with, but, later, I found a note which was addressed to me, and read something like this:

"Captain, you are not the worst man in the world if you did take a mean advantage of me; but I'll be shot if I stay here for Tom Oakes to kill at his leisure. I'm gone!"

"To this letter was signed Rockheart's name. I never saw him after that, but just as we were about to sail again after a day in port, word came to me that one of my men was dead. I went to the low groggery where he had been killed and found Tom Oakes with a knife-wound in his heart. Men said it was a bar-room quarrel, brought on by rum, and that the slayer had escaped. But in their description of him I recognized Rockheart, and I could easily see that he had watched for his enemy and squared the account with the balance on his own side. From that time I have not seen him, nor heard from him, nor heard his name until to-night."

The ex-mariner ceased and leaned back in his chair.

"And that is all you have to tell?"

"Yes, unless I add that Rockheart's kit, which was sent aboard by the man with the big beard, has never been claimed. And I have kept it, thinking he might some time want it—you see my conscience has not been easy. I sent the chest here on my return from that voyage, and here it has been ever since '29."

"Did it contain no papers of importance?"

"It was locked when he left it, and it has never been opened."

Smith looked at the captain in mild astonishment.

"I would like to see the interior," he said, after a pause.

The captain argued against this as a breach of good faith, probably forgetting his part in Rockheart's abduction, but he yielded at last, and the chest was opened.

It contained the articles a sailor usually carries, being only remarkable for the quantity and quality, which were beyond the average; but the search did not reveal any paper or anything of value.

They began to replace the articles, but in so doing Smith made a discovery. Among the

articles were several pieces of tobacco, once large and excellent no doubt, but by that time as hard as flint. One of them, however, he found to be much lighter in weight than the others, and investigation showed it to be hollow.

Nor was this all. In the hollow he found three pieces of paper, closely folded and covered to prevent any accident occurring to them. These precautions had preserved them in good order, and the detective proceeded to examine them.

All were letters addressed to Rockheart by Rebecca Gardner, or more probably mere scribbles written by a young woman whose thoughts were with her lover even when he wasn't near her, let him come ever so often.

The first was unimportant, except that it referred to Jay Bennington and her sister Harriet in a casual way.

In the second, however, was a significant sentence.

"Thursday evening," wrote Rebecca, "is the time fixed for the marriage. You and I, of course, must go; as it is to be kept secret, no other parties would do."

It was a stray sentence, with nothing to explain it, but it was not to be lightly regarded.

Smith turned to the third, and there he found enough to hold him attentive to the end. In this Rebecca had written as follows:

"MY DEAR JAKE:—Jay has asked me to write to you in regard to what we were talking about. Harriet is very sick, and cannot possibly live. I have thus far kept her illness from the knowledge of outsiders, and as we are poor no one will be likely to trouble us as to the cause of her death. Jay renews his offer of five thousand dollars to us if we keep his secret, and I shall be only too glad to accept. This money will make us comfortable for life, and as Harriet will not live to assume her rights before the world, we shall have nothing if we decline. Jay is much troubled by your stand, but he hopes you will reconsider. So do I, Jake. Let us take this money and go where we are unknown, and begin life anew. We cannot help Harriet; let us help ourselves. Jay is very honorable; he says he will acknowledge the marriage to the world if Harriet lives; but she cannot live. Come here this evening without fail."

"P. S.—Butcher reports everything well."

The detective read the note twice and then leaned back in his chair. The first picture that came to his mental vision was of a neglected grave in a little grove, and of a gleaming white slab on which was the laconic inscription: "Harriet; died October 10, 1829. Aged 20."

There was a somber sadness about the lone grave now which even his imagination had not invested it with before. Once Rockheart had sneeringly asked why Harriet's surname was omitted. Smith needed no further answer, now, than the letters in his hand; 'twas because she had been Jay Bennington's wife and the fact had been kept from the world.

Pride seemed the curse of the Benningtons. Smith thought of Relya Hadshaw, Elbert's broken vows and the death at the Bennington grounds, and he thought of Jay, the Gardner sisters and the lone grave.

When the detective claimed the right to take the letters, the old captain did not seriously object. He was anxious to keep in Smith's good graces, probably fearing the abduction case might be revived. When he had been properly cautioned not to reveal what had occurred, the detective went away.

He began to have a pretty accurate knowledge of the old-time drama. Jay Bennington had married Harriet, but only few people had known the fact. Rebecca had been bribed to keep the secret, which explained her strange mutterings when she was on her death-bed. But Rockheart, for some reason, had refused to be bribed, and he had been kidnapped. How much in earnest Jay was, was shown, by the fact that he sent a man to kill Jake on the voyage—if Tom Oakes was what men suspected.

The postscript of the last letter was, however, puzzling. What was meant by it? "Butcher reports everything well."

Butcher was, of course, the same as the Butcher of the present day. What had he to do with the matter? What was it he had reported favorably upon?

These and many other inquiries were in Smith's mind as he went toward the village. He was going to Hugh Bennington, whom all these things intimately concerned.

Four years before Hugh's birth, and two years before that of Elbert, and before the marriage of the present Mrs. Bennington, Jay had another wife. But she would never appear to trouble Hugh, or Hugh's mother; the first wife had slept for many years beneath a stone which was marked "Harriet, aged 20."

CHAPTER XXX.

ROCKHEART DEMANDS THE VERDICT.

THE capture of Burt Hadshaw caused a great excitement in and about the village, but it was met with different emotions by various people. On Relya and Mrs. Hadshaw it fell with crushing effect; Sheriff Goodrod and his followers rejoiced; while at Bennington Hall there were expressions of grave gladness that justice had

thus far triumphed. To this effect Mrs. Bennington, Miss Warburton and Hugh expressed themselves. Whether all were sincere, and were not holding anything back, will be seen further on.

Over the Hadshaw cabin the cloud of sorrow settled dark and heavy. Rockheart had broken the news without delicacy, staring admiringly at Relya in the meanwhile, and from that time no one came to encourage or console them. The following day they would be allowed to see the squatter, not before.

No one came to see them, we have said, but it was not until late at night that Relya ceased to watch. She hoped to see Smith, but he did not come. She did not know he was away from town.

That evening Hugh was alone in his private room when a negro announced Jake Rockheart. Hugh bade the man admit them, and then opened the drawer in his table. He had done this to get the knife once before saw him have when Rockheart was present. It will be remembered that Smith secretly secured this weapon, but its loss was not discovered by Hugh until the present occasion.

His brows met in an anxious frown when he saw the drawer empty, but it was no time to search. He stepped out and secured a revolver, and was sitting quietly at his table when the man from the ocean entered.

The latter swaggered to the middle of the room, and sat down on the table in the old style before he spoke a word. Then he shrugged his shoulders and smiled in his cruel way.

"My royal duke, how are you?" he then asked.

"You have come on business, I suppose," said Hugh, with cold disregard of the question. "Be so good as to state it."

"Jake Rockheart takes his time, young man," was the insolent reply, "especially when he has his man on the hip. See?"

"Very well; when you get ready to talk, do so."

Hugh quietly resumed his paper, while Jake looked at him with his smile fading a little. He had an uncomfortable suspicion that his prey was inclined to thwart him, after all, and he preferred something else. Still, he resolved to brave it out.

"Young fellow," he finally observed, "every time you snub me you lay up a stock of wrath to come. I expect an eye for an eye, and so forth."

"Mr. Rockheart, I don't care a picayune whether you do or not. The ways of such a low ruffian interest me but little."

The supreme contempt expressed by his manner stung the visitor to the quick. His bronzed face gained fresh color and he brought his fist forcibly down on the table.

"Perdition seize you! I'll have you know my ways interest you to the extent of fortune, honor and life. Snub me further and I'll drag your name through every social mud-hole to be found in Missouri. That's what I'll do, sir—"

Hugh laid down his paper with a calm smile.

"You are a trifle excited, Mr. Rockheart. Dangerous, that, if your heart is not right. Did you say you had business with me?"

The man from the ocean swallowed twice and then managed to get back the old, sneering smile.

"I am of the opinion I have, my lord duke. I have come for the answer to the question I gave you a week to consider."

"You refer to—"

"In plain words, will you say me to keep that secret?"

"In plain words, no!"

"No?"

"No!"

"Be careful how you jest."

"Mr. Rockheart, it is a man's privilege to jest in his own house. If I see fit, I will throw you out of the window—for a jest. In the present case, however, I do not jest. My answer is, No!"

Rockheart looked in silence for a while, scanning the iron face and the steady gray eyes that met his own. Undoubtedly he wished then that he had a weaker-minded man with whom he had to deal.

"In that case," he finally answered, "I shall publish to the whole world the fact that you are not the legal master of Bennington plantation."

"Quite right."

"Shall I do this?"

"Use your own discretion."

"Beware!"

"You are at liberty to proceed as you see fit. When you came to me with this story I was for the time rather upset. I have been so long at the Hall that it seemed hard to give it up. I asked for a week in which to consider the matter. You have now come for your answer, and the answer is ready for you. It is to the effect that I will not pay you one dollar to keep your so-called secret. Go; publish it to the world as soon as you see fit; then see what you'll get out of it."

Hugh finished with a smile of cold disdain, and then met the wrathful smile of his visitor unflinchingly.

"You will give up the plantation, the Hall, the money—"
 "Everything—if the law says so."
 "Aha! you rely on the law, do you?"
 "Naturally, any claim will be contested."
 "It will be in vain."
 "That is for the court to decide."
 "But think of Jay Bennington's reputation."

"He should have thought of that, himself," sternly replied Jay's son.

"Tarry, Jew, the law has yet another hold upon you," as Shakespeare said, if I have quoted him aright. Hugh Bennington, remember how your brother Elbert died!"

"Well?"

"Is it well?"

"I am listening," was the haughty reply.

"So will the courts listen when I say: 'Burt Hadshaw is not the murderer of Elbert Bennington. By hanging him an innocent man is destroyed. The real murderer is Elbert's brother, Hugh.' They will listen to this, I repeat, and then where will you be?"

"That is for me to consider. Do not trouble yourself about it."

Hugh spoke calmly, but in the strong face there was a shadow which a more timid man might well have wavered before. Rockheart, however, was not easily cowed.

"I suppose you again rely on the law, which is the poor man's foe and the rich man's friend," he said, "but if Hugh may defy it in prosperity he cannot in adversity. Stripped of the fortune you illegally hold, your friends will desert you and you will be tried as an ordinary criminal. This done, you will be hung by the neck until dead."

"Your tongue runs like that of an old woman."

"Let it run further, my lord duke. Let me rehearse the story I shall tell to the judge when you are on trial for your life. This will be my story: 'Your Honor, I will first glance at the motive of this crime. Elbert Bennington, the owner of the great plantation, was about to marry Augusta Warburton. The soul of Hugh was filled with gall and bitterness. He, too, loved Augusta. Loving her, he hated his successful rival, his brother. But he was equal to the emergency; he resolved to remove the man who stood at once between him and Bennington Hall and Augusta Warburton. True, the deed would make him a Cain, but in these days such things don't count.'"

"You are a rare romancer," cried Hugh, contemptuously.

Rockheart smiled contentedly. Sitting on the table he swung one foot as though keeping time to his narrative and, with his evil eyes turned on Bennington, gave his gloating passions full play in facial expression. He went on, only speaking with more satisfaction as he proceeded.

"The wedding night arrived. Elbert was about to marry Augusta. All went merrily and every one was light-hearted and happy. Every one? No; I should except Hugh Bennington. When others smiled, he scowled. He went about among the guests with his dark face like that of a pirate. Well might it be so, for murder was in his heart."

"Does this amuse you?" Hugh asked.

"Yes."

"Proceed, then."

"I will. Well, anon Hugh saw his brother leave the house and go to the grounds. The grand chance had come. The younger brother went to his room—this room—and from the drawer in this table took a long, keen knife. Then he secretly went to the grounds. Chance never favored a murderer more than then. He arrived in the garden to find Elbert quarreling with Burt Hadshaw. I need not repeat what their quarrel was; it is by this time well known to all. Enough that they came to blows and the sturdy squatter left his enemy senseless on the ground. As he receded, your Honor, Hugh saw his chance. His rival lay senseless before him. The modern Cain did not hesitate, but, gliding forward, he thrust the long, cruel knife deep in his brother's bosom. One thrust was enough; Elbert's life went out before it; Bennington Hall was Hugh's and he had no rival for Augusta's hand. He returned to his room, put away the fatal knife—in this very drawer, my lord duke—and the deed was done. Thus shall I explain the motive and the crime at the trial—unless you pay me to keep quiet."

Hugh had remained quiet through all that was said, but he had not been calm. His dark face had moved restlessly and there was a light in his gray eyes as though he was already a hunted man. As Rockheart finished he passed his hand nervously across his forehead.

"Do you suppose this story will be believed?" he harshly demanded.

"Why should it not?"

"It is preposterous."

"Why so?"

"I am a Bennington—"

"So was your brother."

A brief silence followed. Hugh, looking anywhere except at his enemy, scowled until his heavy brows met, and Jake Rockheart watched him with the old glancing smile.

Finally the younger man burst forth explosively:

"How in the fiend's name did you get all this evidence together? It is absurd."

"It is true, and I can prove it. What is more," and here the man from the ocean leaned forward until his evil face was near Hugh, "unless you pay me well I will prove it, and that will send you to the gallows! Which do you choose?"

CHAPTER XXXI.

A PLEA FOR LIFE.

HUGH BENNINGTON did not answer at once, but he no longer presented the bold, scornful front with which he had received Rockheart. This may have been because, while Jake had only hinted at the crime before, he had not expected such minute details. Jake had apparently left no way for escape.

Finally the master of the Hall spoke in a changed, uneven voice, his gaze avoiding that of his enemy.

"What do you demand?" he asked.

"I am not a hard man," said Jake, leaning back and making a cradle for one knee of his interlocked fingers. "Once, I placed the figure high; say at fifty thousand dollars; but since then a gentle emotion has moved my breast. Another and a diviner light has fallen on my path; the lion is changed to a lamb. What I now desire is as follows: For item one, that you introduce me into your family as an honored guest."

Hugh frowned more deeply than ever.

"With what object?"

"So that I may woo and win Augusta Warburton!"

"You?"

"I!"

Rockheart looked insolently at his ease, but Hugh seemed thunderstruck. His eyes glared with rage he could not, or dared not, express.

"You woo Augusta?" he muttered.

"I have said it. 'Death! why not? She is young, charming and fair; she pleases me; and as I hold the reins of power, why shouldn't I woo and win her?"

"She will not look twice at you."

"She will look twice, and thrice, and a thousand times. You will say that I am a very dear friend and you beseech her to use me kindly. This done, my word for it, she'll continue to be my friend. I have a happy faculty for managing the fair sex, *mon ami*."

Here Rockheart paused to interpolate an extract from a love-song, and Hugh, shifting his gaze, stared hard at the wall.

It was two hours later when Jake arose to depart, and the time had been passed by Bennington like a fish writhing on a hook, but with Rockheart at the rod and the barb in his flesh, there was no escape.

He had yielded at last, and promised to introduce the man from the ocean on his own terms; while on his part Jake had sworn that the true story of Elbert Bennington's death should never be known if faith was kept with him.

Neither man had mentioned the fact that if Augusta fell under the arts of her new suitor she would be in a most unenviable situation; but it is probable that Hugh, for one, thought more of his safety than her happiness. That he should give her up, after having committed a crime for her, did not appear to impress Jake as being peculiar.

Hugh was left alone, but not for a great while. Another visitor was announced, and this time the name was Relva Hadshaw.

He hesitated for a moment, but ended by directing the servant to admit her.

She entered, neatly but plainly dressed, but as pretty as ever, despite the fact that her eyes were red with weeping.

Once in the room she stood looking at Hugh hesitatingly, but his perturbation of manner had disappeared, and he spoke in a voice almost gentle.

"I understand that you wish to see me, Miss Hadshaw? If so, please be seated. You can speak freely."

A little gleam of hope appeared in her eyes. When one's heart is torn by misery, one catches at every straw. So Relva Hadshaw, grieving for the squatter as though he was already dead, began to hope anew, forgetting that Hugh was not to be his judge.

"I need scarcely tell you, Mr. Bennington," she said, hurriedly, as she took the chair he indicated, "that I have come in regard to my father."

"Naturally, I suspected it."

"We have heard that he is in prison, and I came to—to—"

She faltered, and his grave, kind voice broke the silence.

"It is to Goodrod you must apply for permission to see him," he said.

"It is not that of which I wish to speak," she said, twisting her fingers nervously. "I want to ask for mercy—for justice."

His face clouded.

"Nothing rests with me, Miss Hadshaw. I am neither judge, witness nor keeper. Really, I know nothing about the case."

Even as he spoke he thought of Rockheart and what he had said, but he had gone at work to carry out a fixed method of conduct. He had resolved not to push Burt Hadshaw, and it was well that he should be kind to Burt's daughter.

"But he is innocent, sir; as innocent as you yourself are; and I want you to believe it!" Relva cried.

Bennington moved uneasily. He did not care to have his own case thus alluded to by a second person.

"If he is innocent he has but to prove it," he replied.

"Alas! appearances are against him, sir. He is hemmed in by a network of delusive but dangerous circumstances. He was at the Hall that night; he was seen here by one of your negroes; and that fact weighs heavily against him."

"Yes," dryly answered Hugh.

"You believe him guilty?"

"It is not for me to say, but public opinion is very much against him."

Relva tried to speak, but ended by bursting into tears. Poor child, her heart was like lead and all the world seemed turned to darkness. Hugh did not seek to quiet her, but he fumbled nervously at his watch-chain and was plainly ill at ease. She soon ceased to weep and raised her head quickly.

"It is to change your opinion—to convince you that he is innocent—that I have come here," she resumed. "I want you, of all men, to believe it. Elbert Bennington was your brother."

"True, but what good can I do Hadshaw? As I have said before, I am not an important witness, nor shall I be his judge. I can neither do him good nor evil."

"You must, sir; you must! Burton Hadshaw is innocent; you must believe it and save him."

"How can I do that?"

"You are rich and powerful, and your will surely will be enough."

"Do you expect me to use it to shield the alleged murderer of my brother?" he harshly asked.

"I only ask you to use it for an innocent man—for Burton Hadshaw is innocent. Mr. Bennington, do you, in the depth of your heart, believe him guilty?"

Hugh moved restlessly and his gaze avoided hers.

"It is not for me to judge, I tell you," he finally said, irritably. "He is accused and will be brought to trial. Then, and then only, will a verdict be given."

Relva's head drooped. She saw in Hugh's change of manner the fact that further words would be useless, and she began to wonder why she had come. He had told the truth when he said he was not to be the squatter's judge, but she had had a strong desire to convince him that her father was innocent. Blind to the fact at first, she now began to see that it had been a waste of time in coming.

She prepared to depart, and then Hugh came to her side with his old air of kindness.

"I wish to say to you that your father will not be tried less fairly because he is a poor man. He will be prosecuted just the same as—as I—would be if I was accused; no more vigorously. Remember this, and let me add that if he is innocent, I sincerely hope that he will escape."

He spoke fairly, but his manner did not invite further effort, and Relva lost no time in getting away. She went with a fresh shadow on her face, but her devotion to her father never flagged.

Hugh, left alone, leaned his head upon his hands and stared long at vacancy. He was far from being in an amiable mood, but though hemmed in by perplexities, his strong mind was grasping all the points of the case and he was resolved to fight to the bitter end.

Rockheart he must pretend to yield to for the time, but he had no idea of allowing him to rule Bennington Hall.

"I love Augusta Warburton," he thought, "and before that vile reptile shall win her, I'll strangle him in his sleep. Let him come to the Hall if he dares! As for Hadshaw, matters must go on. Justice, so called, demands a victim, and Goodrod thinks he has the right man. I pity this Relva, who is pretty and loving, but the squatter must bear the storm."

In the mean while Relva, moving homeward, had met some one whose appearance she hailed with joy. It was the man named Smith, as calm and deliberate as usual.

When the first greetings were over, they walked on together; and Smith proved his devotion to her interests by giving her two papers, signed by Goodrod, which would admit her to the jail to see Hadshaw any time after twelve.

It was but natural, in such a case, that she should then ask the great question in her mind.

"What are we to do, Mr. Smith? They have drawn the net of evidence tightly around my father, and we lack that great lever which lifts the accused above danger—money. We cannot hire a brilliant lawyer as we wish; we must

rely on whoever the State allows us. We are really powerless."

"I would not raise groundless hopes in your mind," Smith replied, "but I do not believe Burton Hadshaw will ever come to trial. I say this with a lighter heart than when I first enlisted in your cause. Then, I confess it frankly, it was your face and eyes and your manner that made me your father's friend. Now I believe him innocent."

"But we cannot prove it."

"We must."

"But how? He cannot establish an *alibi*; on the contrary, his enemies can prove that he was at the Hall that night, and he admitted having a hand-to-hand struggle with Elbert."

"We must prove his innocence by proving the guilt of another person."

"Do you suspect any one?" she asked, quickly.

"Yes."

"Whom?"

"Pardon me, but I must not tell that. No more suspicions must be breathed against innocent men. I am working hard and discovering a good deal, and I hope to discover more. Therefore, I hazard the prediction that your father will not be brought to trial, or, if tried, that his innocence will be quickly established. I wish you to be of good cheer, and remember that I am working for your father. I will not say success is certain, but I have strong hopes."

"I have not heard that Leopard Luke is in prison," she said, timidly, after a pause.

"He is not," Smith answered, frowning as he remembered the events of the day to which she alluded. "He escaped me for the time, but I am not sorry it is so. Your father's capture was not due to him, and he is merely strengthening the hold the law has upon him by each fresh crime. Missouri is getting excited over his deeds, and the so-called King of Horse-Thieves goes off the stage forever, I think, when he is again captured."

The detective walked to Relva's home with her and conversation did not flag on the way. He left her lighter of heart, and when he plunged again into the swamp his manner was less grave and composed than usual.

"A little while longer and the suspended sword falls!" he muttered. "I begin to see clearly and there will be a grand development at the end. The case will bring me fame, but I am really sorry for Hugh. He has saved my life, and now I must turn about and deal him a death-blow!"

CHAPTER XXXII.

BUTCHER IN JAIL.

EVENING found Hugh Bennington and Augusta Warburton alone in the parlor. Mrs. Bennington, after a perceptible improvement, had been so affected by the squatter's capture that she had been obliged to take to her bed again, but she was not in a condition to cause alarm.

Augusta had cared for her nobly and amply proved that all women born and bred in affluence are not helpless creatures in time of need. The young lady had borne her own sorrow and comforted the elder one, and more than ever the latter wished she was her daughter.

Perhaps Hugh shared her wish.

On this evening he was strangely ill at ease for him, but the cause became apparent when a servant ushered in a guest. He did this without first bringing his name because he had been so directed by Hugh, and Jake Rockheart swaggered in as though he owned the Hall.

The man from the ocean had made some changes in his toilet and gotten himself up regardless of expense and good taste. Indeed, so flashily was he clad, he would have been taken for a St. Louis gambler.

A frown crossed Hugh's face, but he had but one course before him. He arose, and with all the grace he could master from his disgust, put out his hand. Augusta was looking in surprise, but she was introduced and Jake was bowing before her before she could think clearly.

"I am delighted to see you, miss; delighted right from the word go," Rockheart declared. "I've seen you before and cottoned to you a good deal, and as I've come to hang out for some time I'm sure we shall be thick as doves."

Miss Warburton's face expressed surprise and disgust. She murmured a few indistinct words and looked at Hugh. His face was dark with wrath; he saw that Rockheart had intentionally made his manner as coarse and offensive as possible and felt a strong desire to throw him from the window.

Jake, alone, preserved his self-possession.

"Ben—I call our friend, Bennington, so, for short—will tell you we are old cronies and the best of friends. When he takes snuff, I sneeze; and *vice versa*, whatever that means. Oh! we make a blooming pair, and when we straighten the traces the load begins to rise. Eh, Ben?"

The man from the ocean poked his friend (?) facetiously in the ribs, but the latter had by that time recovered his own self-possession.

"Rockheart, you'll have your joke if the sky falls," he managed to say, with a degree of

good grace, "but you are rather premature. Miss Warburton must be thinking you a madman."

"If so," said Jake, buoyantly, "we will yet convince her there is method in my madness. I have come to stay if the roof holds on and the Missouri don't burst its banks. But sit down, good folks; sit down and make yourself at home!"

Having thus taken upon himself the office of host, Rockheart looked at the table, as though longing for his usual position, but contented himself with a chair.

To say that Augusta was disgusted and surprised would be to but faintly express her feelings. She had seen Jake's prototypes on the Mississippi steamers before then, and had looked at them as one does at a new species of wolf; but that she would ever be presented to such a vulgar wretch by Hugh had never occurred to her in her wildest dreams.

Mr. Rockheart sat down and elevated one leg over the other, after which he commenced his peculiar oratory again. It was a severe trial for both his auditors. Hugh was plainly full of wrath, but the motive which had led him to admit the fellow to his family circle necessarily kept him silent now when he would rather have throttled him.

Augusta, on her part, would have said nothing had not she been so directly addressed. From the first, Jake showed his resolution to force his society upon her.

Luckily, a servant came to summon her to Mrs. Bennington, and the men were left alone.

"What d'ye think of my make-up?" Rockheart at once asked.

"It is villainous. You look like a cross between a zebra and a river gambler. Why in the fiend's name did you dress so?" Hugh fiercely demanded.

"Soft and slow, my lord duke. I think this a royal outfit. What! would you have me dress like a parson? Not I; the eyes of young ladies are charmed by good clothes and I am here to win our Augusta. I expect you to help me, too."

Hugh could hardly keep his hands from the wretch. He lounged back in his easy-chair and caressed his mustache constantly, while his whole manner was an insult. But Hugh remembered the night tragedy in the garden and held himself in check. The time might come when he would send Jake Rockheart forever out of his path, but he was not then ready to do it.

Prudence had caused him to allow his worst enemy at the Hall, but prudence might yet make him silence that enemy forever. For the present, such was not his policy.

Butcher was held in the jail to answer at the felon's dock for harboring Burt Hadshaw, a branded murderer. No one, however, expected that he would ever be punished more than by confinement previous to his trial. Living the hermit life he had, it was likely men would believe him if, on trial, he declared he had never heard of the Bennington tragedy.

During the first day in prison the squatter had several visitors. Goodrod came and, thundering at him like a young tornado, tried to make him confess his guilt; and later came the prisoner's wife and daughter. To Goodrod's credit be it said he allowed them an hour without interruption.

But Butcher had but two visitors. They were Goodrod and Smith, of St. Louis, but they could not get so much as a word from him in regard to Hadshaw; he would not admit that he even knew the squatter.

Smith, however, had other business on hand, and he did not fail to speak of it.

"I don't think you will have any trouble from this case," he carelessly observed. "You were the slave of Jay Bennington, were you not?"

Butcher meditated for a moment and then acknowledged that he had been.

"Well, every one will know you would not knowingly harbor one who had injured the family. Jay Bennington gave you a thousand dollars of clear money, I understand."

Butcher looked at him suspiciously and did not reply.

"Haven't you gratitude enough to acknowledge it?"

"Now look right hyar, sah," said Butcher. "I's got nuffin' ter say; nuffin' at all. I don't want talk an' I ain't a-gwine ter, sah."

"Not even about Harriet Gardner?"

Butcher started and his eyes grew preternaturally large. Then his lips unclosed.

"I've said dat I wouldn't talk, an' I won't. De rack sha'n't git another word outter me, sah!"

With this assertion he turned his face to the wall, stopped his ears with his hands and remained like a post until Smith was gone. The latter did not remain a great while with such a companion, but he went away resolved that Butcher should talk before he was through with him.

His investigations had given him a good many points in regard to the lone grave in the grove, and the white headstone marked "Harriet,

aged 20," and he intended to have the rest in some way.

As soon as Butcher was alone all his calmness and stoical air vanished. He sprang to his feet with the agility of twenty years and ran to the door and window in succession. He seemed to fear some one was listening, or watching, though what there was for them to discover was not clear until he began to mutter, when it became plain that he wished to think aloud and in safety.

"De ribber am arisin' and comin' mighty close," he said, waving his hands excitedly. "Dat yer man am on de track. He asked about Missy Harriet! Golly, ole Butcher de ribber am rollin' nigh. Now, wharfore did he want know 'bout Miss Harriet? He's got a s'pishion, hez dat man. Like ez not dey'll put me on a crucifix ef I don't talk. What kin I do?"

He ran to the window and shook the bars with his bare hands, and when he could not move them, beat them with his fists like a maniac. It was not until his knuckles were bruised and bloody that he desisted, but even then he was not quiet. Standing in the middle of the room he looked about as though for a crack through which to dart, and his mutterings were resumed.

"De fam'ly honor am in my hands an' I must preserve it, but how am I ter do it? I must get away from hyar, an' Massa Hadshaw must go wid me. It must be did, but how?"

It was an important question, for jails are usually built to hold. Butcher, however, would not have given up if the cell had been of solid rock. He studied the place with a critical eye and then turned again to the window.

"I must get out o' hyar!" he muttered.

It seemed a mad undertaking, but he was not in a situation to choose; and the window afforded the only hope.

No one but a desperate man would have thought of working at it bare-handed, but Butcher was all of that. From his point of view great dangers hovered in the air and he longed to escape and get back to his swamp den.

So he laid hold of the iron bars and began his work systematically. The bars bent slightly, but they showed no signs of giving way. Butcher, however, dared not be discouraged. He went on, steadily and patiently, pulling and wrenching as best he could.

While he worked the day wore away and darkness fell. Once he was interrupted by the bringing of his supper. He had time to throw himself on the floor and nothing was suspected.

When the jailer went away he resumed operations, but he was trembling so he could scarcely work. One of the bars had loosened under his efforts and the danger of discovery had frightened him.

But his strength soon returned and a little energetic work removed the bar. One step was taken toward freedom!

He continued his efforts, using the first bar as a lever, and the work progressed as well as could be expected. When the town clock struck ten the opening was wide enough to admit of his passage through.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

THE ATTACK ON THE JAIL.

BUTCHER stood hesitating and trembling. Thus far all had been in his favor, but he lacked the courage which repeated adventure gives to men. He put his head outside and listened intently.

All was quiet and as usual. The jail, whatever the condition of the window forced by the negro, was provided with stout doors and no guards kept watch outside. Indeed, men were rarely confined there except for trivial misdemeanors.

Butcher turned back, put the food in his pocket and then raised himself to the level of the window. He had a descent of ten feet to reach the ground, but this was of no importance. He poised himself for the leap, made it, and was practically a free man.

It only remained to promptly retreat from the town.

He did not avail himself of the chance; however, but, turning the corner of the prison, fixed his gaze on another barred window from which shone a faint light.

This, he knew, was that of Burt Hadshaw, and he looked about for means of reaching it. He had retained two of the bars taken from his own window to use on the other, but in order to do this he must reach the level.

Luckily, houses were near, and by going to one of them he secured a ladder which was just what he needed.

By the aid of this he gained the level of the window. His eager eyes looked for the occupant. But Hadshaw was there and alone. Visiting hours were past and the jailer had made his last call.

The squatter sat on the floor with his back to the wall. His hands were clasped in front of his bent knees and his head drooped nearly to them. His whole attitude was one of profound dejection. Whatever encouragements had been offered him during the day had plainly failed to convince him. The shadow of the gallows was still before him.

Butcher spoke quickly.
 "Massa Hadshaw!"
 The squatter did not stir.
 "Massa Hadshaw!"
 Bart raised his head and looked stupidly about him, but it was not until Butcher had twice again repeated his call that he aroused and went to the window.
 The two men clasped hands and Hadshaw aroused a little.
 "This yer is right good in ye ter come an' see me," he said. "O' course ye know I'm ter be hung ter-morrer. I don't know ye, but your sympathy is kindly took; right kindly took!"
 Butcher could hardly avoid a groan. He saw that the squatter's mind was wandering and feared the worst.
 "I've come ter take you away, sah—"
 "But I ain't ter be hung till mornin'," Burt protested.
 "Tain't that; tain't that!" said the negro, hurriedly, for he knew he was liable to be discovered at any moment. "We gwine home, sah; back ter Copperhead Swamp, ye know."
 "Copperhead Swamp!" echoed Burt, with a start. "I've heerd o' that. Copperhead Swamp—ther cabin—Relva— Hal kin I go ter them?"
 "Yas, yas, sah; ef we kin get de winder clear. Hyar, sah; take this bar and pry away de others."
 The squatter received and waved it as though he would have forced his way at one blow.
 "Let any one come an' I'll crush their skulls!" he fiercely exclaimed. "I remember now; I'm shut up for what I never done; I'll get out or kill every man in ther village!"
 Butcher hastened to quiet him to the best of his ability and work was begun. The first move had barely been made, however, before the negro put up his hand.
 "Quiet, sah, qui-t!" he cautioned. "What's dat?"
 "What's what?" Hadshaw sourly asked.
 But Butcher did not answer. He heard a clatter of many feet, a rattling like that of fire-arms; and before he could move again several horse-men appeared in the darkness and shot toward the jail.
 Who they were Butcher knew well enough; they were Leopard Luke and his followers.
 Straight toward the building dashed the wild band, and even the negro feared for himself. He dropped to the ground, and oddly enough, was unseen, though as he crouched by the wall the earth was flung against him from the horses' feet.
 "Surround the place and don't let a man escape!" cried Leopard Luke's well-known voice. "Shoot any one who resists. Others of you look for a battering-ram."
 Their imperative knocks sounded at the great door of the jail and the head of the keeper was seen at a window. He suspected the trouble and did not intend to be seen in turn, but the eyes of the horse-thieves were sharp.
 "Open the door!" shouted Luke. "Open, you hound of law, or we'll break your head for delaying us. We want Burt Hadshaw and we are going to have him. Open!"
 The jailer made no movement toward obeying, and a moment later the jail shook as the besiegers hurled themselves against the door. They were plainly in dead earnest, and Butcher, for one, was filled with consternation. It was not that he feared for himself; Luke was his friend; but he saw the horse-thief actually engaged in work which might yet cost him dearly.
 The building shook under the fierce attack, but it did not give way in any particular. The door was heavy, and well calculated with a view to just such emergencies, and the jailer had strong hopes that all would go well. Help would certainly arrive in a short time.
 A fall followed the first assault and Luke was heard ordering his men to quickly find a battering-ram. Then he bailed the jailer, who deemed it prudent to answer.
 "What's wanted?"
 "You are wanted to open the gate. Throw it open!"
 "What for?"
 "I tell you we want Burt Hadshaw. And we are going to have him."
 "Are you lynchers?"
 "Lynchers be shot! No! We're friends of justice and of the squatter. He is an innocent man and the bounds of law can't have him. Throw open the door!"
 "I'm here to keep it closed, and closed it stays."
 "Open, you dog, or we'll break in and then hang you to your own house. This is the last call. Open!"
 "No, I don't; and if you want it done, blaze away. Only, look out for the law and Sheriff Goodrod."

With this warning the jailer hastened to the room where Hadshaw was confined. The light was dim in the cell, but it was enough to show the squatter standing at bay, the iron bar grasped as a weapon. It was plain he took this attack to be from the lynchers, and it was not hard to imagine the tiger-like fury in his face.
 The jailer called his name, but received no answer. It is doubtful if he was heard. Just then the building shook from a heavier shock than the first.
 "They have a battering-ram!" the jailer exclaimed.
 His supposition was correct. A somewhat heavy timber had been found by the stormers, and this, carried on their shoulders, had been driven forcibly against the door. It shook before the assault, but once more its excellent material stood the test.
 The horse-thieves were howling with rage. They knew Goodrod and his men would soon be on the scene, and that the combined efforts of the village people would quickly scatter them. The squatter must be rescued before they arrived, or not at all.
 "At it again, men!" shouted Leopard Luke. "Drive the cursed door through the building! Now!"
 Again they rushed forward, and the battering-ram dealt a heavy blow. The door wavered before it, and more than one crack became visible in the hard wood.
 "Hurrah!" cried Luke. "One more time will do it, and then we will liberate an innocent man. Remember Burt Hadshaw, boys—a poor man, like ourselves. Hol the ram! Up and at it, boys!"
 His men rallied at the call, but then on the night-air pealed another cry—a cheer loud and strong, and distant enough not to proceed from their band, but too near by far when they realized that their foes had at last aroused.
 "Hurrah! Hurrah! Down with the out-laws!"
 "Goodrod!"
 The word ran through the horse-thieves' ranks, and they were plainly ill at ease; but Luke himself was not easily frightened.
 "Quick with the ram!" he ordered. "Beat down the door before they can reach us. Quick!"
 But the stormers did not respond, and as Goodrod's men came down at a trot there was a rush for the horses despite Luke's orders, entreaties and threats.
 Reckless as the horse-thieves were, they were tiring of such extreme crimes as Luke had led them into.
 Butcher had not remained until this time. Thoroughly frightened, and unable to reason clearly, he had not only forgotten Hadshaw but that Luke was his friend, and he thought only of escape. Accordingly, he had seized his chance, and glided away unseen by the horse-thieves.
 When at a safe distance he paused and looked back. He was just in time to see the flight of the stormers. Several shots followed them as Goodrod's men charged up to the jail, but as they were mounted they rapidly receded with derisive shouts, while Goodrod had to be content with settling down around the jail.
 Butcher was still looking when a hand was laid on his shoulder. He bounded like a wounded deer, but a strong grasp held him fast. He looked up to see the man named Smith.
 "So far, all right," said the latter, calmly. "You have evaded them neatly."
 "You—you—you won't take me back, sah?" stammered Butcher, helplessly.
 "Certainly not, if you answer a few plain questions. I'll now tell you what they are. I'll come right down to the point, because if you won't answer, they want you back in jail."
 Butcher began a frightened plea for mercy, but Smith cut him short.
 "Listen to me, old man. What has become of the child of Jay Bennington and Harriet Gardner?"
 This time Butcher started more than before. It was as though he had been stabbed in a vital part. But Smith gave him no time for thought.
 "Is that child Leopard Luke?" he demanded, in a subdued but cutting voice.
 Butcher trembled like a leaf in his hands.
 "Bress de Lord, sah, I don't know what you mean. I don't know nuffin!"
 "Don't deny it!" Smith sternly interrupted. "Jay lawfully married Harriet and a child was born of that marriage. You carried it away in your arms one dark night. What became of it? Where is it now?"
 The detective was presenting a good deal of theory under the guise of fact, but he believed he knew the ground under his feet.
 "Answer me," he exclaimed, in a threatening voice, "or, by my life, I will take you back to jail."
 "No, no!" cried Butcher, wildly. "Don't do it, sah; don't do it, an' I'll tell all I know!"
 There was a crashing of the bushes; a man sprung into view; he leveled a revolver and fired at Smith—a harmless shot—and then his other hand drove a knife into Butcher's side. The negro fell; then, before Smith could seize the assassin, he had darted away. Butcher lay, apparently dying, and the band which had dealt him the fatal blow was that of Leopard Luke.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

THE DETECTIVE TAKES THE TRAIL.

The following day Relva Hadshaw had a visitor at an early hour in the person of the

man named Smith. He was as kindly received as ever, and the light in his eyes was pleasant, but he had come on business, and had little time to lose.
 "Have you heard last night's news?" he asked, when the first greetings were over.
 "No. Is it anything about—?"
 "Yes. Leopard Luke tried to storm the jail and rescue him."
 "And failed?"
 "Happily, yes."
 Relva looked at him with questioning eyes, and he went on steadily:
 "I say happily, because if he had succeeded the name of your father would have been ineffaceably associated with that of one of the worst ruffians in Missouri, and because we have only to wait a little to prove Burt Hadshaw an innocent man and to enable him to go entirely free."
 "You speak positively."
 "Because I feel that way. I was sent from St. Louis here to work up this case. I have been working to the best of my ability and not in vain. I have discovered enough so that I feel sure your father is innocent. More than this, though Goodrod believed him guilty, and is exulting over his triumph over 'Smith, of St. Louis,' I feel sure that Burt will be as free as any of us before long. I have made strange discoveries, and have a startling revelation to make anon. I came here to-day to bid you be of good cheer, but not to drop a whisper of what I have told you. Certain parties might be frightened away."
 "Then the real criminal lives near here?"
 "I am not under oath; don't question me," laughed Smith.
 "Hugh Bennington thinks father is guilty."
 "Does he?"
 "Don't he?"
 "He will have a chance to explain his views when the murderer of Elbert is in the felon's dock," Smith grimly replied. "And that won't be long. I'll spring my trap before long. Just now I have another work on hand. I am going in search of Leopard Luke."
 "You are?"
 "Yes. There is a reward for his capture which I want, and he is a scourge to Missouri. Again, he bears a slight relationship to the case in hand, as I have lately learned. There is a certain man near here would wish Leopard Luke had never been born if he knew. But never mind; here I am talking like a garrulous old woman, instead of a close-mouthed detective. I'll stop short!"
 He laughed, and Relva managed to join him. He remained only a short time longer, but when he went away she was in a happier mood than she had been since that fatal night when Elbert died.
 But had she known what fate had in store for Smith she would have been less at ease.
 A wood, half-swamp, half higher ground, not so large as Copperhead Swamp but well adapted for a place of refuge; a score of horses cropping the green twigs, and a score of men camped where the ground was dry and high, and amusing themselves with pipes, cards and story-telling.
 It was the band of Leopard Luke, and the King of Horse-Thieves, himself, lay asleep under the bushes.
 He did not look in as good condition as usual. The scattering volley of bullets sent after the band when they had retreated from the jail had killed his horse and dashed him senseless to the ground. His men had not noticed his fall, or, if they did, had disregarded it and pushed on; and when, in the morning, their leader reappeared he looked worn and weary. There was blood on his hands, too, but when they asked with whom he had fought he answered with curses.
 Lying asleep under the tree he muttered frequently, and Fetlock Phil, the lieutenant, listening, often heard the name of "Butcher."
 The lieutenant walked apart with lowered head and a thoughtful air while the others rested. He was not a happy man. Wild and reckless, he had joined the band without suspecting to what it would come, and now the weight of crime was proving too heavy for his conscience.
 While he walked he was startled by the sudden appearance of a man whom he knew was not one of the band. Yet, this man at once pronounced the name by which Phil was known in the band and nodded familiarly.
 The lieutenant looked at him in questioning silence.
 "I want to ask a favor of you, Fetlock Phil," continued the unknown.
 "What is it?"
 "I want to be admitted to your band."
 "We don't want any new members," Phil curtly replied.
 "Still, you'll recommend me as a first-class man and I shall be accepted."
 "I shall do nothing of the kind!"
 "Wrong, Fetlock Phil, wrong. I know what even Leopard Luke is ignorant of—your past. Refuse to oblige me and I will say to the world: 'James, son of Judge Penton, of Missouri, is a

member of Leopard Luke's horse-thief band. How would that sound?"

Fetlock Phil had started back with his face pale and agitated.

"It is false—false!" he cried.

"It is true, and I can prove it. Come, young man, don't struggle on the hook; the barb is in your flesh, and you are in my power. Let me say that I have no desire to injure you. All I ask is that you will make me a member of the band. Do this, and I will do all I can to prevent Judge Penton from knowing where his son is."

The manner of the stranger was far from menacing; on the contrary, it was almost kind; but Phil felt that it would not do to trifle with him.

"Who are you?" he asked.

"My present name is of no account. Once in your band you may call me Double Hoof."

"You have some object in view of which I know nothing. What is it? I am in your power, but I would not willingly become a traitor. If you intend harm to the band, I cannot—a—cannot help you."

"Excuse me, Fetlock Phil, it is not for you to consider. Obey me, according to the first law of nature—self-preservation. Look no further in the matter."

The lieutenant did not yield at once, but as the stranger had said, he was on the barb and each struggle made his situation worse. It ended as the stranger had expected; rather than have his story known, he consented to introduce the unknown as a man he had long known, and do his best to make him one of the band. What was the man's object he declined to tell, but he declared that he would preserve Phil's secret as long as faith was kept with him.

When the last preliminary had been arranged, they walked to the camp together. Luke was awake, and having just finished eating, was in improved spirits. As a result, when Double Hoof, as the new recruit named himself, was introduced and vouched for by Fetlock Phil, he was warmly received and made one of the band without any unpleasant investigation.

"Boys," said Luke, when this was done, "I think the time has come for us to strike again."

The men looked at each other blankly for a moment, and then one, bolder than the others, observed that after what had occurred at the jail, he thought they had better "lay low."

"Just the reason why we should push out," said Luke coolly. "They will expect us to keep in cover, and we shall thus be able to take them unawares."

He did not succeed in convincing them at once, but as a leader he usually had his own way, and the case under discussion was no exception to the rule. He stated that he had heard that three men had been purchasing horses for some time and would start the following day from a given point to take them to market.

It was his idea to intercept them in a thick wood twenty miles north of their present camping-place.

All finally agreed to his plan, though Fetlock Phil and Double Hoof were the last to vote. The latter kept silent because he was a new member and modesty demanded it, while Phil seemed in an unusually melancholy mood.

The band were to remain at their camp until midnight and then devote the remainder of the night to reaching the forest before mentioned.

Double Hoof had made a good impression. He had a frank, jovial air, told a good story and played cards with such even luck that he never won more than he lost, nor lost more than he won.

His new associates accordingly made him welcome.

Many of the men laid down to sleep for a while before the march was begun, but Double Hoof arose and walked away from the camp. No one took notice of his departure, a fact which he first established and then quickened his pace and strode away rapidly.

At the end of a fourth of a mile he paused by a large tree and listened. All was silent. He uttered the cry of a night bird, with a tremulous finish, and an answer was quickly given. Then a man stepped from the deeper shadows and the two clasped hands.

"So you are still alive?"

"Yes," answered Double Hoof, quietly, "and what is more, I am a regular member of Leopard Luke's band."

"He does not suspect you are a detective by the name of Smith?" laughed the new-comer.

"Don't whisper the fact, Dixon. No; he suspects nothing. More than this, he has arranged to seize those horses. The forest of River Curve is selected as the place. In fact, all works as we would have it, and if you look out for your part I see no reason why we can't gobble the whole band."

"We'll have them sure. My horse is ready and I will hasten away at once and bring our helpers."

"Good; only be cautious, for some of the horse-thieves are out and it would be a bad affair if they saw fit to see and take you in. This scheme must not miscarry; more depends on it than you yet know."

CHAPTER XXXV.

THE AMBUSH.

SMITH returned to the camp and met with no questioning. Leopard Luke did not suspect his worst foe was near him. The detective had not grown up in his profession for nothing, and he could disguise himself as well as the actor who treads the boards, not hunt men, for a living.

Leopard Luke feared him. He had been worsted in fair fight, and from every trap he set Smith escaped. On the night when he stabbed Butcher in such a cowardly way he had not dared to stop and fight Smith. His shot at him had gone wild, and then the horse-thief went, himself.

But the hour of his discomfiture, if nothing worse, was nigh. He had upon his trail a man who was keen and relentless in hunting down men of his stripe.

At midnight the band moved and rode twenty miles north. The journey brought them to the forest where Luke expected to seize the horses.

Day had not yet dawned, so a camp was found near the road and breakfast prepared. The horses were not expected before ten o'clock, but it was necessary to be on the spot and keep very quiet.

After night passed, Smith spent the greater part of his time in watching Fetlock Phil. The lieutenant was ill at ease and Smith suspected a struggle was going on in his mind. He had become tired of his life and the crime to which he was made a participant, but his nature revolted from playing the traitor.

Once he walked near Luke, hesitated, and then went away, but Smith dared not delay longer. He went to his side and spoke sternly:

"Penton, of what are you thinking?"

The boy outlaw looked at him fiercely.

"How dare you call me by that name?"

"It is the pledge of your faith. If I knew you merely as Fetlock Phil you would betray me in a moment. But you know that if you do that now I should shout your real name to all. You don't want that done."

"What is it to you if I see fit?"

"More than you think. You have a mother, a sister, a father who is a judge and an honored man. Low as you have fallen, Penton, you would save them from disgrace."

The young fellow brushed his hand across his face and Smith saw that perspiration stood freely along his forehead.

"Who the fiend's name are you?" he demanded.

"Your friend, if you will have it so," replied Smith, gently. "You are a young man; less than twenty-one. I would save you while there is time. You are engaged in a bad cause and one sure to end in destruction. Leopard Luke's race is about run. It is not yet too late for you to save yourself. Which shall it be—ruin, disgrace and death, or escape from them all?"

His grave, warning voice could not fail to make an impression, but it was terror which assailed Phil.

"You are a spy and this is all a trap. Horses are coming, but there are soldiers, too, and we are about to be seized!"

"Such are the terrors born of your situation," said the detective, calmly. "You see danger where none exists. So far as I know there is not a soldier within forty miles of here. Yet, Fetlock Phil, it is never too early to save one's self from such a situation."

"I was the means of introducing you here," said the boy, a wild light in his eyes. "If you are what I suspect, my mates will brand me a traitor. Hear me, then, when I say that at the first proof of treachery I will turn my revolver on you and send a bullet to your heart!"

With these words he wheeled and walked away. Smith did not try to stop him. For his threat he cared nothing; he had heard many like it since he began his dangerous calling. Yet, desiring as he did to capture Luke and all his band, he did not like Phil's stand. The boy was in a mood like that of a peevish woman and his conduct could not be measured. He might remain silent, or, yielding to a sudden impulse, betray the detective.

The hours wore on and the band began to prepare for action. The place was where the river made a curve into the middle of the wood and the road, curving to meet it, ran for some distance within a hundred feet of the bank.

The horse-thieves were between the road and river, and to retreat they must cross the latter if Dixon did his work well and barred both sides.

The hour at which the horses were expected drew near and arrived. Leopard Luke had men out on the road to bring the first tidings of their approach, and at last the further watcher came in to report them in sight.

Smith glanced at Fetlock Phil, but the young fellow was looking away from him.

Leopard Luke spoke a few encouraging words and posted his men. Smith was near Phil and he watched him as before, but the boy did not turn his gaze from the road.

A few minutes passed and then all heard the sound of hoofs. It was of the dull, heavy kind made by a horse that merely "jogs" along, and another picket came in to report their prey near at hand.

Smith maintained his coolness wonderfully well, yet he did not fail to recognize the importance of the moment.

There was another pause and then from around a bend in the road came the horses. They were about thirty in number, with only three men in charge, and Leopard Luke was jubilant. He deemed success certain and it would put many dollars in the pockets of the band.

Such a glorious capture had not before been made since he was at the head of the old band.

A few directions the leader gave and then the horses came nearer. The men seemed unsuspicious of danger. A little nearer yet and then the decisive command was given.

Out from the bushes rode the outlaws and the stupid-looking travelers found their way barred.

"Hands up!" cried Leopard Luke. "Not a move along the line or you are dead men!"

The three travelers looked very much surprised.

"Who—who—what's the matter?" stammered one.

But before Luke could speak further Fetlock Phil dashed along the line to his leader's side.

"Beware, captain!" he cried; "this is a trap! Soldiers are near and we are betrayed. Save yourselves while you can!"

He would have spoken further, but there was a rattling which all knew was of firearms and a crashing in the bushes which confirmed Phil's assertion.

"Soldiers!"

The word ran along the line and the outlaws became at once hunted men, for whom capture meant ruin.

"Make for the river and escape!" ordered Luke.

"Each man for himself. Forward, charge!"

They needed no second order and no one stood on the way of his going. The crashing of bushes at once announced their attempted retreat; but the soldiers were in the way and a fierce struggle began. Neither side, however, discharged a weapon.

Smith watched the result with a keen gaze. He saw Fetlock Phil beaten down and captured, but it was plain the soldiers were not in sufficient numbers to make certain the seizure of all the outlaws.

Their leader fought furiously and broke through the main line. A high fence and a single soldier then opposed him; but one hard blow prostrated the man and then, as the spotted horse leaped into the air, Leopard Luke turned in his saddle and waved a defiant farewell.

Another moment and he was beyond the fence; the spotted horse settled down to work and the King of Horse-Thieves was gone. Two of his men followed close at his heels.

The capture of the rest of the band was a small matter to Smith, compared with that of the chief, and he resolved to follow him to the bitter end.

Giving his horse the spur he dashed after them, skillfully knocking over a soldier who barred his way, and a moment after the splashes of his leaders told that they had taken to the river he reached the bank.

Leopard Luke and his few remaining followers were urging their horses forward, and in another instant Smith was close behind them.

The outlaw leader looked like a madman then. All his hopes and pride, base though it was had been centered in his band, and to see it thus demolished at one blow made him furious. His look would not have been gentler had he known that one of the men who followed him did so with the settled purpose of hunting him down.

The southern bank had almost been reached when Luke, looking around, uttered a cry.

"Down, every man! The soldiers are taking aim. Down, I say!"

Smith had not needed the warning; he had seen the soldiers appear on the bank and level their weapons. He dropped flat just as a whistled shower of lead passed over them. Then Leopard Luke arose, waved his hand and sent back a derisive yell.

The detective scanned the right bank with an anxious gaze. If the trap had been perfectly set there should be men there awaiting their landing, but from what he had already seen he feared the numbers of the soldiers had not been sufficient for it.

Their horses touched the bank and gained land and the question was settled. There was no further obstacle to their flight.

Leopard Luke, however, broke into loud and mad imprecations. Of all his band, but three remained. Fetlock Phil and the others were in the hands of the soldiers.

"The old league is gone to destruction," he added, "but the King of the Horse-Thieves still lives. Ay, and he shall live to make his enemies curse the day they molested him. With a new band at my back I will—"

He paused abruptly, as though remembering that some intentions are better concealed than told, and then pointed to the south.

"Hide on, boys. Those fiends are already crossing the river, but I will show them Leopard Luke is not so easily caught. Come, let us go!"

They went, but Luke, buried in bitter thought, did not suspect the hostile element in the few men who followed him.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

LEOPARD LUKE'S IMPLACABLE Foe.

IT WAS NOT a hard matter for the horse-thieves to escape their pursuers, nor was it an isolated case where United States soldiers have been thus evaded. Leopard Luke knew the country well, and he led the way so successfully that the pursuit might as well have ended at the river.

Where he went, Smith followed. The detective had but one thought in his mind; to capture the King of Horse-Thieves and set him face-to-face with justice. In order to do this he was prepared to follow him an indefinite time. Luke had but two men besides "Double Hoof" left, but the three made odds Smith did not care to fight. When he found the chief unguarded, he would pounce upon him.

At any rate, he would follow his quarry like a bloodhound and seize him when the chance came.

The fugitives lost no time after leaving the river, but, striking off across the country, and endeavoring to break their trail as they went, they made for one of their numerous hiding-places.

We have said that they endeavored to break their trail. Luke did take due precaution to this end, but he would have been less confident as to the result had he known that "Double Hoof" was undoing all he did.

According to a previously arranged system, the detective was scattering bits of paper along the trail which would enable the pursuers to follow without any great loss of time.

Twenty-five miles had been covered when the fugitives rode into a pine wood and camped. They were wet, tired and hungry, and they proceeded to make a substantial meal. His troubles had not destroyed Luke's appetite, but he was no longer in his old, buoyant mood. Feeling the blow deeply, he lay in almost total silence, his brows contracted in a scowl, only speaking in reply to some question from his men.

"Double Hoof" did not make any remarks to the

chief. It was dangerous, and as a new member of the band he was excusable. He lay in an attitude of profound dejection, but his gaze was always on Luke; he was watching him as a cat does a mouse. When the meal was finished the chief aroused. "Boys," he said, "we have had the fiend's own luck. We count but four where we were two-and-twenty. Yet I, for one, never felt less like crawling into a hole. From this hour I live for vengeance. Each man we have lost to-day shall cost the State ten thousand dollars. No horse shall be safe from St. Joe to Pilot Knob. I'll make Missouri howl for this. Who is with me?"

"I!" The response was earnest and universal. Every man had spoken, and every man was in earnest—even Smith, for he was resolved to follow Luke to the end. With a position assured in the band he would go where the king went until he had succeeded in hunting him down.

"Good!" said Leopard Luke, as proud as though they were to follow him in a good cause. "You shall see that we will arise, Phenix-like, from our present gulf of despair."

A shadow fell almost within their camp which could not be traced to tree, or rock, or bush, but they saw it not. Behind the shadow was a man who was surveying them with a care which did not warn even Smith.

This done he silently withdrew.

The talk went on and no one suspected that men in army blue were creeping toward them. Yet, Smith's allies were again at hand. Guided by the signs he had left by the way they had followed like the red dukite stealing on its prey.

Nearer yet they came, but the environment had not been made complete when a twig snapped under the foot of a soldier.

Leopard Luke bounded to his feet.

"The enemy is here!" he cried, sharply. "Flee for your lives!"

With these words still on his lips he sprang for his horse, gained the saddle and gave the animal a blow which sent it bounding away. A luckless soldier who caught at the rein went down with a bullet through his head, for the desperate ruffian had gone too far to scruple at anything.

His men had fared less well; all, including Smith, were in the hands of the soldiers. The detective was in an unenviable mood. He was a prisoner and saw the King of Horse-Thieves receding. Unless Dixon could be found he would not be able to follow.

Luckily Dixon was at hand, and at his word Double Hoof was liberated. He ran to his horse, mounted and dashed away to rejoin Luke. Realism seemed necessary in the case, and the detective deliberately bruised his forehead until the blood ran down his cheek.

In the meanwhile Luke had fled at topmost speed. The soldiers were shouting in the rear, but he did not heed them. He knew his horse and he knew the country.

Not far ahead was a narrow bridge which spanned a small stream. He made for this, and as he struck the planks turned to wave a derisive farewell. Facing to the front once more he caught the glitter of a firearm in the bushes at the further side of the bridge and knew his enemies had foreseen this way of flight.

He was riding into an ambush.

His hand fell to the rein to check his steed, but even as he realized the danger, a sharp crackling ran along the frail structure; it seemed to settle under him, and with a louder crack, bridge, horse and Leopard Luke shot down toward the rushing water.

Old and weak, it had given way at last.

The descent was not a great one, but the surface of the water was flecked with white foam where the swift current beat on the jagged boulders dimly seen from above, and no one would willingly have taken the plunge.

Luke had not entirely deserted the horse-thief, however, and this accident saved him from capture. He went down without injury, his spotted horse caught himself in fine style, and before the soldiers above could recover their wits, the fugitive had gained the northern bank and was again speeding away, his derisive shout floating back to them in the old way.

He had little fear as to the result. He knew his horse and had faith in his speed, but when fairly away from the stream he raved like a madman. Of all his followers not one remained to him; he had, indeed, become a sorry-looking "king."

"But I'll triumph in the end!" he swore. "I'll rise above these misfortunes, and Missouri shall wade in blood for her ingratitude. I'll be the scourge of the State, and my name shall ring from Portland to Puget's Sound. From this time I'll regard human life as a mere bubble!"

These ferocious mutterings were brought to an end as he discovered a single horseman galloping after him. One glance was enough to show that it was not a soldier; a second look revealed the man's identity.

"It's that new recruit, Double Hoof," he said, aloud. "Good! I am not all alone. I'll slacken a bit, and let him overtake me."

It was singular that he did not have the least suspicion of the "new recruit," but the most cunning criminals will, in nine cases out of ten, commit some error of judgment.

So Luke waited for Double Hoof, who came up in good form, despite the blood which covered one side of his face.

"We are all that's left," Luke abruptly said.

"That's somethin' more left," said the disguised detective, with a savage scowl. "Look at that revolver. That is two barrels empty, an' over yonder that's a man chewin' lead fur supper."

The outlaw leader grasped his hand.

"Bravo!" he exclaimed. "You are just the kind of man I like for company, and when the new band is formed you shall be the lieutenant. I, too, dropped a man back there, and I'll drop more before I get done with Missouri. I have been hunted like a dog, and I'll have revenge!"

Double Hoof applauded these resolutions, and then asked toward what point the king was heading.

"Back to Copperhead Swamp," Luke answered. "I defy them to find me there, even though they

have once been through it. Curse that Jake Rockheart; I'll have his life some day!"

And so they rode on, and, two hours after dark, reached Copperhead Swamp. They rode as far as possible, and then concealed their horses and went on afoot.

It was near midnight when they reached a knoll where Luke proposed to camp. And there they did camp, building a huge fire to dispel the damp swamp air.

Both men were tired, and Luke had no sooner finished his supper than he cast himself down by the fire and was soon asleep.

Double Hoof, too, had laid down, but he did not sleep. O her and more important matters were on his mind; the hour of his triumph was at hand.

At any time after he rejoined Luke after the bridge accident he might have captured the outlaw, but when he heard him say he was going to Copperhead Swamp he formed another plan.

Leopard Luke was soon asleep, but he would sooner have laid down by a moccasin-snake than by the man who kept him company at the camp-fire had he known all. Smith, lying on one side, watched him with a gaze which never wandered.

His reputation as a human bloodhound had not been exaggerated.

At last Leopard Luke slept soundly. Then Smith arose. He glided forward like a shadow. He bent over his victim, marked his position and the chances, and then flung himself upon him.

The horse-thief awoke with a start. He had been dreaming that his foes were on his track, and he associated this rough experience with them.

But he found no weight upon him, and saw no one except "Double Hoof." The latter was standing several feet away, near the fire, regarding him steadily.

Luke made a movement to arise, and then made a new and startling discovery. His wrists were confined by handcuffs.

This much known, he looked again at Double Hoof, and as he saw the smile on the latter's face a terrible fear assailed him. Why was he a prisoner in his own camp?

CHAPTER XXXVII.

THE HOUR OF VENGEANCE.

LEOPARD LUKE was not long in putting his question into words.

"What does this mean?" he demanded.

"It means that your race is about run, King of Horse-Thieves," Smith coolly replied. "In other words, you are near the end of your rope."

"Who put these irons on my wrists?"

"I did!"

"You?"

"I!"

The deadly enemies looked at each other in silence for a moment; Smith calm and motionless, Luke furious with rage and strangely beset by gloomy fears.

"Who are you?" he finally demanded.

"One Smith, detective, of St. Louis; the man you have been pleased to nick-name 'Mr. Sneak,' and he whom you bound to the tree in this swamp to meet a horrible death."

Leopard Luke sunk back on the ground, wrenching at his bonds like a madman.

"Fool—blind fool!" he groaned.

It was plain he referred to himself, and no one could doubt his sincerity. It was indeed a bitter and humiliating discovery.

"If you are dissatisfied, you have only yourself to thank for it," Smith went on coolly. "I did not come to Copperhead Swamp with any enmity toward you or to have anything to do with you, but you would not keep your fingers out of the fire. You saw hatred and insulted me. Several times you attempted my life, and once you bound me to the tree in this swamp, with the rising water and the alligators for my companions. I can forgive all but that, but not until I cease to wake at night, covered with sweat, from dreaming that scene over again, can I forgive your devilish cruelty. I am now a personal, as well as legal, foe!"

Luke looked at him with mingled fear and defiance.

"Well?" he questioned.

"Well?" retorted Smith; "you'll find it is not well!"

"What are you going to do about it?"

"I'm going to have my revenge."

"In what way?"

"You shall see in the morning."

"Detectives should work for the law, not for revenge."

"Leopard Luke," was the serious reply, "I have said I am your personal enemy now; so I am. It may not be in keeping with my office, but I believe in that good old doctrine: 'An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, and a nail for a nail.' If I err, that is my lookout."

The outlaw looked at him with a murderous expression in his eyes, but he was helpless.

"I suppose you'll send me to jail now," he sullenly said.

"You will see to-morrow," was Smith's only reply.

It was a long night for Leopard Luke. Bound to a tree he saw his enemy sleeping serenely by the fire. It did indeed seem as though he had gone to the end of his rope. Toward morning, despite his uncomfortable position, he fell into an uneasy sleep, but even there the detective haunted him.

When he awoke Smith was preparing breakfast. Of this the prisoner was allowed to eat, but his hands were never freed from the relentless grasp of the irons. The meal ended, the detective touched his arm and tersely said:

"Come; let us go!"

Luke obeyed without a word. He knew that an appeal for mercy would be useless and he would not subject his pride to such a blow. No; come what might he would not bend to Smith.

They went on for half a mile, but their faces were not toward the village. Instead, they were going deeper into the swamp. Luke wondered if Smith had lost the way or what purpose was in his mind.

Suddenly, however, he turned his face toward his captor, a really alarmed look appearing in his eyes. They had arrived near where he had bound the detective to the tree and left him to the companion-

ship of the rising water and the alligators. Was this chance, or—

Smith came to a halt. They were on the brink of the bowl and the pool lay before them. Smith, still holding to his prisoner, looked down for a moment in silence and then turned to Luke.

"You see where we are. Down in this hole you left me to a prolonged and terrible death. If you had had your way I should never have lived through it. But I escaped, and, to-day, the tables are turned; so completely turned that I am going to bind you there and see how you like it. See your old friend, the alligator! He is smiling at you across the pool; he is waiting to greet you, to shake hands, and he shall not be disappointed!"

"You dare not do it!" feverishly exclaimed Luke.

"Why not?"

"You are an officer; the law has claims on you."

"It has claims on us all!" retorted the detective.

"You forgot that when you gave me over to such a fate, I shall forget it now, since the tables are turned."

"Is this the way you perform your duty?"

"It is the way I take my revenge!"

Smith's tone was implacable, and though Luke was actually trembling he saw it would be folly to ask for mercy. All his pride, too, arose, and he set his teeth firmly and resolved not to speak further.

The detective lost no more time. Leading his prisoner down the bowl he bound him to the same tree before used. Thus, Luke's situation became exactly what his had once been, except that a decayed tree had since fallen across the pool and left its broad trunk in such a way that it almost touched Luke's breast.

The water was above his elbows, but it would require damming to raise it higher. From across the pool their old acquaintance, the alligator, watched operations with manifest wonder.

"Here I shall leave you," said Smith nonchalantly. "I have business at the village, but to-morrow I shall return to see you. I shall not attempt to drown you, but leave the water as it is. If the alligator don't take off your head you will probably be here to-morrow when I return."

Leopard Luke shut his mouth tightly, resolved to utter no word of the terrible fear that was in his mind. Smith ascended the bank, paused for a moment to utter a few mocking words of farewell, and then turned away. Luke heard his receding footsteps for a moment and was then alone.

Alone? He looked across the pool to the grim and repulsive alligator and then shivered as he had never shivered before. Well enough he knew the saurian's liking for human flesh and he could not doubt as to the end. He thought of the horrible jaws closing over his head, and his blood seemed to turn to ice.

He began a mad struggle with his bonds, as Smith had done when similarly situated. The effort was as useless as Smith's had been; his cruel scheme had recoiled on him with crushing force.

Anon, the alligator stirred and began moving around the pool in his awkward way. Evidently he had forgotten his past experience and was going to see what meant this head and pair of shoulders arising so curiously from the water.

He waddled around until he reached the fallen tree and then, as the trunk made such an excellent bridge, drew himself upon it and moved nearer the outlaw.

Leopard Luke lost his courage then and a shriek burst from his lips. He had resolved not to call for help, since nine men out of ten, if summoned, would be his foes, but he forgot all that then.

"Help! help!"

The cry broke from his lips with all the power of his lungs. The alligator paused and looked at him stupidly. Again the horse-thief uttered his call.

The saurian looked at him in his dull way for a while, but as his appearance was not very alarming, slid along the tree-trunk another yard. This brought him within two feet of Luke's face, and his hair seemed to stand on end. Then, if never before, he knew what he had made Smith suffer. Better a dozen deaths by knife or bullet than one at the hands of this monster.

"Help! help!"

He still cried lustily, but the alligator was becoming used to it. Perhaps, too, he remembered that he had lost another victim by too much delay.

So he thrust his long nose forward, opened his jaws and showed the doomed villain a mouth which looked worse than a battery of guns.

"Help! help!"

The cry was loud and shrill, but it seemed likely to be his last. The saurian advanced another pace; his breath fanned his victim's face. Then, as with pale lips and starting eyes Leopard Luke shrunk in speechless horror from his impending fate, the alligator prepared for the final effort.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

BUTCHER HAS A VISITOR.

IN a little cabin at the south side of Copperhead Swamp, and not a great distance from that of the Hadshaws, a man lay on a sick bed. He had a huge, almost gigantic frame, but age and something else were telling on him, and he had not left the bed since he was carried there.

For this was Butcher. Leopard Luke's knife had not made a fatal wound, but had it not been for Smith the old negro would have died before he could have reached a human habitation. But the detective, with his usual energy, had dressed his wounds, carried him to the cabin, and made arrangements for him to be well cared for.

And there Butcher had been ever since. He was doing well, but such injuries would not heal in a day and he must wait patiently.

It was a sad time in the old man's life. He had loved Leopard Luke devotedly, despite his many faults, and it was a most cowardly and inhuman deed for the man to strike him down. But it bade fair to react on himself; Butcher had been clearly shown of what poor clay his idol was made, and he had dug up the affection of years and put Luke behind him.

The people of the cabin had obeyed Smith and nursed the negro faithfully, but it came to pass that he was one afternoon left alone just at twilight for a short time.

The time proved shorter than Butcher expected,

for his attendant had scarcely gone when the sound of footsteps was followed by the entrance of a man.

Butcher looked up and saw Jake Rockheart.

"You here!" he exclaimed.

The man from the ocean smiled blandly.

"As you see, though I wonder that you recognize me. There has been a change in my worldly position since we last met, my venerable friend, as my clothes may suggest. How's this? Ain't it gorgeous?"

Jake thrust his thumbs into the arm-holes of his vest, and, displaying that dazzling article in the best light, tried to impress Butcher deeply.

"I see," said the latter, indifferently.

"How do I compare with the J. R. of the days when old Bennington and I played the lover to the sisters Gardner? I was a gay youth in those days, and I believe I am well preserved. Eh, old boy?"

"Oh, yes, sah," said Butcher, but there was a trace of uneasiness in his voice.

The man from the ocean drew the table near the bed and sat down upon it. No other position seemed to suit him so well, and looking down at Butcher with an evil gleam in his eyes he looked like a Mephistopheles.

"I've come on business, old boy," he resumed, lightly. "We once met in Rebecca Gardner's cabin when you searched it all over for her confession. You failed to find it then, but you have since done so. Where is it?"

"Deed, sah, I habn't found it," the negro hurriedly declared.

"Nonsense! I know better. You have found and hid it. Now, look here, old boy. I'll give you a thousand dollars for that document. Mind, a thousand bright, gold dollars! That's a fortune for you—"

"I don't want 'um!" said Butcher, sturdily.

"Nonsense! Now, that paper is of importance. A trifle less than thirty years ago Jay Bennington married Harriet Gardner. He never intended to acknowledge the marriage. Why? Because he was a Bennington, rich and proud, while she was a poor girl. How he was to get out of it finally, Jay hadn't a ghost of an idea, but he was mad over the little beauty and marry her he would. What was the result? A son, born heir to the Bennington wealth! But was it acknowledged? Hardly. You, Butcher, know what became of that son."

"I know nuffin' about it!" declared Butcher.

"My good man, this habit of lying is growing on you. You do know, but of that we will not speak now. Let me resume my story. Harriet Bennington, nee Gardner, never arose from her bed. She died, and the world was told 'twas from heart-disease. All rubbish! Then Jay wanted to hush the matter up. He sent the heir away by you, and he bribed Rebecca, Harriet's sister, to silence. He tried it on me, but I kicked over the traces."

"More fool, you!" muttered the negro.

"Right, old boy, to a dot; more fool I. I had a spasm of conscience and told Jay he had no business to deprive his heir of the fortune. Result, he drugged me and shipped me on a sailing-vessel. Once, during the voyage, I thought he had an assassin there to kill me, but when I had it out with the fellow—Tom Oakes was his name—I found it was an old personal spite Oakes had. Jay was clear of that deed, anyhow. But he made me a wanderer for near thirty years, for I accepted my fate and went all over the world. But now I'm back and am looking after the family dollars. Butcher, where's Harriet's boy?"

Rockheart leaned forward and shot the question out abruptly, but the negro did not waver.

"Don't know, sah," he stubbornly said.

"Butcher, you lie! Jay gave the boy to you and you took him away in your arms. People have wondered why, after you had been a runaway and hunted slave, Jay so suddenly became your friend, made you a free man and gave you money enough to last your life through. It is no riddle to those in the charmed circle. You became a free man and the guardian of the unacknowledged son at one and the same moment. Where's the boy?"

"I's told you, sah, that I don't know."

"Don't tell me so again. Butcher, I have a suspicion in the case. I believe that boy is now called Leopard Luke!"

"Can't help what you believe, sah."

"When I first saw the man, over in What's-his-name's saloon, I was struck by the resemblance. Luke is a good deal like what Jay was in his youth; more than that, he is a good deal like what Elbert was when he died; again, you cotton to Luke like a brother. Own up that he is the boy."

"Ef he is I don't know it," persisted Butcher, but his voice was unsteady and his gaze did not meet Jake's.

"Remember the result of proving him to be Jay's eldest son. The marriage was strictly legal and he stands to-day as the elder brother of Hugh Bennington. Plainly, Luke does not suspect his parentage. Let us tell him, and prove it, and he will make us rich. Come, shall we do it?"

"No, sah; a thousand times, no!" declared the negro, with energy. "De Bennington honor is dearer to me dan money, an' Marse Luke is not de heir."

"Fool!" exclaimed Rockheart, losing his calmness and speaking with a furious imprecation. "Are you deaf, dumb and blind? Do you fail to see what a chance is in your hands? You black scoundrel, will you baffle all my plans?"

The man from the ocean had arisen and was standing over the old man in a threatening attitude. There was murder in his face, but though Butcher saw it he did not waver. He was as fixed in his resolution as the eternal mountains.

"Hear me!" continued Rockheart. "I will make Leopard Luke master of Bennington Hall or a corpse. Not many days ago he struck me; struck me to the earth like a dog. Jake Rockheart never forgives a blow, and I swear that if I cannot make him useful I will kill him!"

He made the threat forgetting that since the horse-thief had tried to murder Butcher the latter's devotion must have been shaken.

"Dat's a matter between you an' him," he answered, with unexpected composure.

Rockheart jerked a knife from an inside pocket and held it over the negro.

"Curse you!" he hissed. "I'll have satisfaction in one way if I can't in another. Either you swear to

aid me in my plans or over the divide you go! Which shall it be?"

Butcher did not answer. There was alarm in his face, for he knew his peril was great, but he was old and life had few charms. His wrinkled hands clasped, and then he met his enemy's gaze with unexpected firmness.

"This shall be a night of slaughter," resumed Rockheart. "I have it on good authority that the lynchers will be up and at it before day. They've gone wild against Burt Hadshaw and he has got to swing. While they're having their picnic, I'll have mine. For the last time, will you be my ally or that of death?"

There could be no doubt as to his purpose. In the dark, evil face was a murderous light and the uplifted knife did not waver. One blow would sever Butcher's already slender hold on life, and he was prepared to deal that blow.

But there came an interruption. A light footstep sounded at the door and Jake wheeled. He saw a boy, a child of less than ten years, who was gazing in youthful wonder at the stranger in his father's cabin.

The murderous knife fell; Butcher was safe; the child, young and weak though he was, had prevented a murder!

Another moment and Jake was gone. One leap took him through the window, and then they heard his footsteps in rapid retreat.

The boy, who had not seen the knife, stared in childish wonder, but his astonishment was turned in a new direction as Butcher feebly swung his feet out of bed.

"Massa Benny, get my clo'se, honey. I's got somehow ter go."

The boy's eyes opened wider than ever.

"You can't go, Butcher; you're sick," he logically argued.

"I's got ter go, chile. I's done heerd dat de lynchers is a-gwine ter hang Burt Hadshaw an' I must drag my ole body long de road ter let Miss Relva know. Her fader must be saved."

"I'll go with you!" cried Benny, with boyish enthusiasm.

And a few minutes later they might have been seen on the road, the child steady on the steps of the old negro, who was more fit for his sick-bed than for the road; but both strong in the resolution to save the squatter from the lynchers.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

TROUBLE AT BENNINGTON HALL.

EVERYTHING seemed to be about as usual around Copperhead Swamp.

The capture of Burt Hadshaw had not materially changed life in the village, except that preparations were being made for the trial and that, since Leopard Luke's attack on the jail, extra precautions had been taken to guard against the squatter's rescue. No one mentioned Judge Lynch.

It was generally understood that Hugh Bennington was pressing the case with relentless hatred, but when asked what he was doing, even Goodrod had to admit that he did not know that the master of the Hall had so much as turned over his hand to aid in the prosecution.

One man, noting this fact, laughed in his evil way; Jake Rockheart needed no explanation.

After leaving the cabin where he had seen Butcher, the man from the ocean made his way rapidly back to Bennington Hall. His failure to win over the negro had put him in a furious mood, and as he went he cursed his luck, but it did not once occur to him that trouble might result from it.

It was dark when he left the cabin and past nine o'clock when he arrived at the grounds of the Hall. He did not expect to find any one outside, but, striding along the graveled walk, he came suddenly upon Augusta Warburton.

In a moment Jake was himself and he lifted his hat politely.

"Good-evening, my friend. I hope you are well. Out for the fresh air, I see. An excellent plan, most excellent."

"I was just returning to the house," she answered, trying to hide the disgust his presence aroused.

"Don't hurry, Miss Warburton. As a particular favor, I ask you to remain. I have something to say to you."

"Excuse me, but I cannot remain," said Augusta, firmly. "Mrs. Bennington will need me."

"She can have you when I've had my say," replied Rockheart, deliberately barring her way. "I am not always to be put aside for others; to-night the Evil One is in me, if you'll allow the expression, and my voice must be heard. Will you sit down?"

"No, sir," was the haughty reply, and her eyes flashed ominously.

"Have your way, my lady," and Jake laughed in a reckless way which proved what he had said about his mood. "Still, that don't hinder me from saying that I adore you. Do you know why I'm at Bennington Hall? Why, for nothing else in the world but to woo and win you, Augusta, my queen, my charmer!"

This insolence almost staggered the girl. Belonging to one of the oldest and proudest families in Missouri, she had never heard her equals speak disrespectfully to her; and this address from so vile-mannered a wretch was simply overwhelming.

But the man from the ocean was in a mood where men do mischief in haste and repent at leisure, and he was going at a hard gallop without a thought of his road.

"You are silent," he added. "My timid fawn, permit me—"

He had put his arm around her waist and was bending his head toward hers, but with a cry of indignation and anger she sprang away and ran toward the house.

He did not follow, but with a scowl on his face stood grinding his heel into the ground.

"I suppose I've stirred up a hornets' nest, now, but they shall see that I know how to fight to the end. She will tell Bennington and he will fall on me in wrath. Let him do it if he dares!"

The old smile came back to his face and he sauntered toward the house. If Augusta was going to make a complaint he wanted to give her time to do it.

That it had been done he knew the moment he entered the room where she and Hugh were standing together. Her cheeks were flushed and her eyes

sparkling while Hugh's dark face was even darker than usual.

"Good-evening, good people," Rockheart said, airily.

Hugh's strong face turned toward him.

"You owe me an explanation, sir," he said, in a decisive, but even voice.

"Possible?"

"And this lady an apology."

"Possible?"

"Lacking which I shall throw you out of my house!" sternly added Bennington.

The man from the ocean moved forward to the table, sat down upon it, and swinging one foot, looked at Hugh with the old, mocking smile.

"Possible?" he carelessly repeated.

"You shall see. I will not allow any man to insult a lady who is my guest. You shall apologize!"

"My dear Hugh, I shall not apologize and you cannot make me. Don't put on airs, my fine fellow, for I am master here. You dare not anger me; I have you on the hip!"

His manner was the personification of insolent and vulgar triumph, and one might have thought him a disciple of Mephistopheles; but except for a slight paleness and a tense look around the mouth, Hugh was perfectly calm.

He turned to Augusta.

"You have heard this man's boast, Miss Warburton," he steadily said. "He has claimed to have me in his power, and you see he intends to use his power to the utmost."

"So I do," interpolated Jake, snapping his fingers.

"But his power is a brittle reed," added Hugh.

"Is it? Perhaps the world would believe it a brittle reed if they heard my story. Perhaps even this girl, little versed as she is in law, would sneer at my story."

"We shall see," calmly replied Hugh. "Miss Warburton, you shall hear the story he refers to, and judge for yourself. He claims, and I have reason to believe him, that something like three years before his marriage to my mother, my father, Jay Bennington, married another girl. She was poor, and my father was unmanly enough to conceal the marriage. He kept the secret for a year. Then his unacknowledged wife died. My father had her buried on this plantation, but on the head-stone her name was never placed. At present it bears the simple name of 'Harriet.'"

Jake Rockheart was looking dumfounded. He would as soon have expected to see Jay himself appear and tell the story, as to hear Jay's son tell it.

Still he managed to force a laugh as Hugh paused.

"You don't tell all, my lord duke. Relate how—"

"Peace!" interrupted Hugh, with cold firmness.

"All shall be told. The second claim of this creature," pointing to Jake, "I am not yet prepared to call either true or false; but I suspect it to be a fact. He claims that a son was born of the marriage of my father and Harriet Gardner. If this is a fact, that child, if living, is, of course, my senior by four years, and the master of Bennington Hall."

"Where he will be reigning by another month, and the present lord duke will be a beggar," Jake added.

"This creature," steadily pursued Hugh, "came to me with his claim a short time ago, and demanded money to keep the secret. I confess I was at first dumfounded, and I asked for a week to consider. By looking at old letters I was soon convinced that there was truth in what Rockheart said, and I have no doubt Rebecca Gardner would have told the same story had she retained her senses to the last. Well, I disliked to give up Bennington Hall, and I yielded a little to this man. Thus it was that he became an inmate of this house. If I paid him he promised to keep silent; otherwise, he would produce Harriet's son."

"Which I should certainly do," said Jake.

Looking at him steadily, Hugh resumed:

"Perhaps the chance is still open to you, for unless you apologize to Miss Warburton I shall throw you out of the house!"

"You dare not. Remember I have got another hold on you. Ha! ha! I have you on the hip!"

Hugh turned calmly to Augusta:

"I will explain what he means. On his first visit this man insinuated that my brother, Elbert, did not die at the hands of Burt Hadshaw, but that I was myself the murderer. I scarcely gave the matter a thought then, but later he made a direct accusation. I had always thought there was a faint chance that Hadshaw was innocent, and when Rockheart accused me, it flashed upon me that he, Rockheart, was the real criminal. Did I accuse him in turn? Assuredly not; I resolved to go slow and trap him. I pretended to be moved, and he told a yarn which would sound specious enough to a judge to explain how I did the deed. He had learned some of my movements the fatal night, and he patched in others to account for my time—"

Thus far Rockheart had listened in silence, furious, and seeing all the secrets by which he hoped to control Hugh thus made public, but at this point he broke in hotly:

"Say what you will, you are the guilty man, and I will send you to the gallows! You, you, Hugh Bennington, murdered your brother Elbert! Why did you do so? Because he was your rival in love, as well as financially. Your elder brother, Bennington Hall was his; and he was about to marry the woman you loved. Ay, for you do love Augusta Warburton, and it was to win her that you murdered your brother!"

Jake had arisen from the table, and he poured forth his terrible accusation madly. Augusta, who was hearing strange and startling news, shrunk back at these last words and became paler than she had been when she saw Elbert Bennington lying dead.

But Hugh had never been calmer outwardly.

"I deny your charge, first, last and always," he evenly said. "My hand was never raised against my brother, and I pray that the guilty man may be punished. As for your charge, you may make it public as soon as you see fit. But, to resume. I said I once suspected you had done the deed, and that was why I allowed you to enter here as a guest. I did not fear you, but I wanted you where I could watch you. Well, I have learned beyond a doubt that you were in New Orleans the night of the mur-

der and I no longer suspect you. More than that, you are no longer wanted at the Hall."

Dumfounded, confused and wild with anger, the man from the ocean had begun to say he would stay in spite of him when Hugh, with a panther-like leap, sprung upon him, a warlike wrath in his strong face.

Rockheart was like a child in his hands, and in a moment more he was raised aloft and then shot forward; and with a rattling of sash and glass the man from the ocean was cast like the reptile he was through the window.

CHAPTER XL.

HOW JUDGE LYNCH HELD HIS COURT.

JAKE ROCKHEART had barely disappeared from view in this unceremonious manner when Hugh turned to Augusta, the battle-fire fading from his face.

"I beg that you will let this scene pass quickly from your memory, Miss Warburton," he gently said. "I regret that you should have witnessed it, but it was one beyond my control. As for that creature I have cast out, I trust you do not believe his assertion that I harmed Elbert?"

"I certainly do not," she earnestly replied. "I am ready to believe he would speak falsely on any subject, and I cannot believe you capable of such a deed. Rest assured, I do not doubt you. But is there danger that he will make trouble for you?"

"None at all," Hugh answered, smiling. "I am too well known for that. Nobody except Rockheart has ever held such an idea. No doubt Hadshaw is guilty."

"But the—the other affair?"

"My father's first marriage? Well, if it is proved that there is a son older than myself, I shall not seek to deprive him of his rights. He shall have his share, but he must prove beyond question that he is what he asserts."

Before more could be said, a servant hurriedly entered.

"Massa Hugh," he said, "dar is trouble at de village. It am around de jail, an' it's said de lynch-ers are there ter hang Burt Hadshaw!"

"The lynch-ers!" exclaimed Hugh. "By my life, this must not be. Guilty or innocent, I would not wish the squatter to die at the hands of a mob. Excuse me, Augusta; my place of duty is in the village."

With these words he rushed from the room, and leaving him to make the journey we will go more quickly ourselves.

Those dark figures creeping forward like panthers stealing on their prey, their faces toward the jail and those faces covered with masks—what are they?

Knowing as we do the event planned for the night we cannot doubt; the lynch-ers are abroad and Burt Hadshaw was never in greater danger.

They crept quite near the jail before showing themselves, and then with a rush they darted forward. They had profited by Leopard Luke's unsuccessful attempt and did not stop to parley with the jailer. They had brought a team so heavy that ten men were needed to carry it, and as one end was driven against the door the whole building shook and gave the first warning to those within.

"Back, and at it again!" cried one man, who seemed to be a leader, and the order was obeyed.

The jailer was on the alert, and though the door had been strengthened as much as was possible, he knew it must soon give way before so determined an attack. He rushed to the nearest window and fired a doubled-barreled gun as a warning to the authorities, and awaited the result.

Crash! The battering-ram struck again, and as though blown in by powder the door shot from its place.

Then the lynch-ers poured in. They knew well enough where to find the squatter, and they did not pause until, before the door of his cell, they found the jailer at bay.

He shouted to them to hold, but there was a rush and he was beaten down and bound in a twinkling. His keys were not to be found, but axes had been brought and the lock was soon broken.

The door flew back, and the lynch-ers rushed in. But Hadshaw stood there, at bay, his whole appearance like that of a wounded bear in a corner, his eyes blazing with a most maniacal light.

He shouted a warning, but they would not heed it. They flung themselves upon him.

Then the thud of heavy blows was heard, and several of the mob fell. With his clinched fists, alone, the squatter beat them down one after another. Such a fight none of them had ever before seen. He seemed to have the strength of half a dozen men. His blows were like the stroke of a sledge-hammer. Well was he proving his old reputation of a hard fighter.

But it was only a case of time; the odds were terribly against him; he was finally overpowered and carried out struggling in their grasp.

A few rods from the jail stood a large tree. Men had already been there, and run a rope over a limb. Hadshaw was dragged underneath and the noose put over his neck. His hands and feet had been bound, and he was helpless.

In a moment he would have been swinging in the air, but at that moment a light form darted through the crowd and to his side.

Relva's arms were around her father's neck. "Back!" she cried, in a wild voice. "If you are men, stand back and do not touch an innocent man!"

A brief silence followed the appeal. Her attitude was heroic. Her youth, her beauty and her bravery touched the hearts of all. But the spell soon ended, and the harsh voice of Judge Lynch arose:

"Take the girl away!"

They started to obey, but the first man who touched Relva was cast aside like a log. A newcomer had appeared on the scene; he stood over the squatter and his daughter like a knightly defender and a revolver was in each of his hands.

"Back, every man!" he shouted. "If you harm Burt Hadshaw you are murderers. Elbert Benning-

ton did not die by his hand. The real assassin is in custody; his name is Leopard Luke!"

The speaker was the man named Smith.

"An' hyar am I ter add my voice," said Sheriff Goodrod, pantingly. "Smith, o' St. Louis, an' me are together in this pull. Burt Hadshaw is innocent!"

There was no response from the lynch-ers. Goodrod's men came hurrying up, and in the confusion the mob melted. As in a twinkling every mask vanished, and all who remained were in a fever to shake the squatter's hand and congratulate him.

Thus fickle is popular sentiment. Goodrod was speaking with bluff kindness to Burt, while Smith, holding Relva in his arms, had his word to say.

"Be of good cheer, best and bravest of girls. Your father is safe. Leopard Luke is the real slayer of Elbert Bennington and I can prove it. My prisoner is in the village now."

It was a fact. We left Leopard Luke tied to the stake and menaced by the alligator, but just as the reptile was going to crush his head, Smith put a bullet through his eye. The detective had not lost sight of his prisoner at all. Knowing him to be the murderer of Elbert, he was resolved to bring him to justice, but first the private debt must be paid.

Hadshaw had just been taken back to his cell, which he was sure to leave a free man the next day, when a panting messenger rushed up to say there had been a fight where Leopard Luke had been left, and that the horse-thief and another man were dying.

Smith hurried back. He found Jake Rockheart already dead, and Luke fast sinking. Jake had approached and taunted the prisoner, and then the latter had managed to snatch a revolver and shoot him. But it had been a costly deed, for with his last strength the man from the ocean thrice stabbed him, thus avenging the old blow and the new.

The horse-thief beckoned to the detective.

"Smith," he said, "what you charged upon me is true. I did kill Elbert Bennington. He robbed me of Relva, and when he was about to marry another woman I swore he should not do it. I went to the Hall intending to shoot him as he was being married, but chance changed my design. Hadshaw fought him and left him senseless on the ground, and I seized the chance and finished him with a knife. 'Twas because I was guilty that I sheltered Burt when he was accused. I suspect where you got your clew; Butcher saw me do the deed. The negro kept faith with me until I madly attacked him. I dare say he has since betrayed all."

It was even so; Butcher had told all. It had come just in time, for in a day more Smith would have arrested Hugh. He believed he had ample evidence against him, but Bennington was as innocent as the detective himself.

When the clock struck the midnight hour Leopard Luke was dead, but he had left a full confession. And Smith, looking down on his still face, remembered one more thing Butcher had told him, and knew the son of Jay Bennington's first marriage would never trouble Hugh; Leopard Luke had lived and died without knowing his parentage. Rebecca Gardner's written confession, found by Butcher, had only been seen by him and the detective.

We have little more to add.

Burt Hadshaw, fully cleared, was set at liberty, but there was no longer happiness for him in Missouri. Accompanied by his faithful wife he went to California. There fortune has smiled upon him.

From Hugh he received a gift of money which the master of the Hall felt to be but a just atonement for what had been inflicted on the squatter.

Two years after the tragedy we have traced, Augusta became Hugh's wife. They still live on the old plantation and all men honor them. Hugh has never known that at one time Smith suspected him of being a Cain, and though his ways are at times stern he has been a kind husband and a model member of society.

To Butcher, living out his days peacefully on the plantation; to Goodrod, in his high sphere; and to Fetlock Phil, saved by Smith from imprisonment and disgrace, and now living an honorable life, we need give but a glance.

Last of all, we speak of the detective and Relva. She did not go to California with her parents; she remained as the wife of Smith, of St. Louis. With only a quiet sadness when she thinks of Elbert, the squatter's daughter is very happy in her home. Never were people better mated than they. And Smith, after doing remarkable work in the Bennington case, and unraveling every thread in the drama, past and present, promptly abandoned his old calling for one more agreeable.

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